

Three Miles Up

and Other Strange Stories

by

Elizabeth Jane Howard



Tartarus Press

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Introduction

By Glen Cavaliero

Elizabeth Jane Howard is not usually associated with tales of the supernatural; even in the autobiography so evocatively entitled *Slipstream* it is only in passing that she refers to *We Are For The Dark*. And yet that collection of three of her own stories and three by Robert Aickman, which had been published in 1951, was to become a much sought-after item by collectors of uncanny fiction. The absence of any indication as to the authorship of individual stories lent the book an additional touch of mystery, one that was only to be dispersed in 1999 with the publication of Aickman's *Collected Strange Stories*: his contributions turned out to have been 'The Trains', 'The Insufficient Answer' and 'The View'. Once acknowledged, his responsibility for them appeared self-evident; and now with this reprinting

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of Howard's share of the book it becomes clear that *We Are For The Dark* was no mere collaboration but a partnership between equals who handle their sinister material in significantly different ways.

In Aickman's case physical ambience predominates: his settings can seem veritably palpable. In 'The Trains', for example, the isolated moorland house is made the more unnerving by its familiar stuffy drabness and the consciousness one has of its textures and proportions; so too the fantastic Slovenian castle in 'The Insufficient Answer' is described with a wealth of specific, even in places squalid, material detail that establishes it as a verifiable reality and not simply as the product of an extravagant imagination. Aickman's most distinctive backgrounds, however, are to be found in suburbs, provincial theatres, nineteenth-century villas; he evokes a back garden sort of world, a social backwater, slow-moving, stagnant, in which events suddenly go alarmingly askew, dislocating one's sense of what is normal. Some of his tales resemble weird jigsaw puzzles from which the central piece is missing, a piece which would otherwise have rendered the picture coherent and appraisable. There is a teasing and subversive method in the madness of his narratorial manoeuvres.

Where Elizabeth Jane Howard is concerned, however, one is made conscious of design, coherence,

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deliberate artistry. Her novels, so skilfully crafted, so rich (and frequently so humorous) in their surface detail, are rooted in the upper middle-class world favoured by many other twentieth-century women novelists; but without drawing on any element of the supernatural as such, they subject that world to a breath of strangeness. The retrospective narrative employed in *The Long View*, for example, in itself establishes the pervasive influence of the past, a past which becomes the book's climax rather than its starting point, just as in *After Julius* orthodox chronology is called in question through the account of a dead man's continuing presence in the lives of those who have survived him. Again, the use of naturalistic detail in *Something in Disguise*, by emphasising the sheer ordinariness of a serial killer's habits and desires, only goes to emphasise the enormity of what he is and does. But where her overtly supernaturalist fiction is concerned, Howard draws on a variety of traditional methodologies to tell each story in the manner most appropriate to it. She plays a cool hand, and her tales are innocent of any complicity with private phobias or obsessions. They are indeed singularly pure examples of their kind.

Of her three contributions to *We Are For The Dark*, the most conventional is 'Left Luggage'. While belonging to the same imaginative territory as Oliver Onions'

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masterly 'The Beckoning Fair One', its concentration on the lure of baggage in the shape of chests and suitcases and handbags (all of them objects in which further objects may be secreted) recalls Henry James' 'The Romance of Certain Old Clothes' and Elizabeth Bowen's trenchant 'Hand in Glove'. But what distinguishes Howard's story is an elusive sensuousness and a touch of pathos that subtly modifies the atmosphere of menace and forbidden curiosity. 'Left Luggage' also exhibits a recurring feature of its author's supernaturalist fiction—a play upon the peculiar anxiety attendant on departures, the clutch of fear at the prospect of abandoning ground base, of leaving home. Each one of these four tales describes a character who, whether willingly or not, and at whatever speed, is on the move.

If 'Left Luggage' deals with a single railway journey, 'Perfect Love' is a story of perpetual flight. Howard's portrayal of a haunted opera singer belongs to the world of Vernon Lee and Isak Dinesen (pseudonyms of Violet Paget and Karen Blixen respectively.) Told in a comparatively low key when compared with the bravura performances of those two exotic story-tellers, this account of a mysterious victimisation is notable for the prosaic nature of its opening, a sober realism that soon gives way to a troublesome unease. As with many of Aickman's stories, one vital piece of evidence is withheld: what is it

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that happens on the fatal night when Maria Mielli is called away by her mysterious and presumably demonic patron? The consequences are presented with a disturbing ambiguity that intensifies into something shockingly specific when her lover comes upon the material havoc wrought in her bedroom by an unseen child. The effect, however, is to evoke compassion as much as fear of the uncanny. The tone throughout the tale is level, detached, concerned with documentation and with getting at the truth. 'Perfect Love' is only by implication a tale of terror.

Such is far from being the case with 'Mr Wrong'. The most unnerving story in the collection, it lent its title to a volume of Howard's short stories published in 1975. It draws the reader into a world of motorways, lonely service-stations, car parks, all of them suggestive of rootlessness and the subjection of natural human pace and rhythms to the demands of the machine; but here also is a portrait of human fragmentation—of Meg's self-centred hypochondriac father and overprotective mother; of the defensive self-withdrawal of her employer; of the irresponsible complacency of the salesman who persuades her to purchase what turns out to be a haunted motor car. As the contaminated vehicle carries its occupants through the dark it becomes an image of the horrors of claustrophobia combined with all the dangers involved

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in being exposed to the unknown. Each item in the story coalesces with the others—both the cheerful indifference of Meg's flat-mates and the unresponsive attendant at the petrol-station increase one's awareness of her isolation. If the world of the story resembles that of the contemporary crime novel (those of Ruth Rendell come immediately to mind) it is also one that is even more familiar in the cinema, and Howard's switch from one species of terror to another is comparable with that effected by Alfred Hitchcock in his notoriously horrific *Psycho*.

Whereas 'Mr Wrong' induces a feeling of uncontrollable mobility, it is slowness, not speed, which constitutes the dominant note of 'Three Miles Up' which, in view of Howard's own involvement with Robert Aickman's Inland Waterways Association, reveals an imaginative affinity between the two writers. It is also the most parabolic of these tales. An informed use of detail ensures the reader's participation in the leisurely journey through what is at first a featureless countryside, a journey that moves from comic mishaps reminiscent of *Three Men in a Boat* through increasing eeriness into absolute mystery. Its smooth progress and the suggestion of such encoded symbolism as the figure of the old man with a scythe distinguishes it from Aickman's work: this is a tale told by a writer who knows where that tale is going, even if we do not. The psychic tension between

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the two protagonists, and the fear generated by the sight of fear when the small boy catches sight of the enigmatic Sharon, are but two elements that go to make 'Three Miles Up' as much an interior drama as the account of a trip on a canal boat. It is a beautifully judged instance of the kind of story that Aickman would refer to as being 'strange' rather than as ghostly.

For traditional ghost stories are based on a presumption of physical stability, the presence of the past making itself felt through energies which interact with the unfortunate objects of their visitation: the story is rooted in a sense of place and its invasive elements are confined within it. But Howard presents one with uprootedness, with a mobile world in which it is no longer possible to know the security of permanence, one without any overarching metaphysical reality to ratify a feeling of purposes misapprehended or withheld. It is a twentieth-century world of relativities. The spectral manifestations she does not so much describe as deftly indicate are not to be domesticated within a predetermined logical narrative, but are enigmatic aspects of a material universe that is not all that it seems. We are in the dark indeed.

All four of these stories possess a quality that emanates from what in abstract terms we designate as 'poetry', the suggestion of those mysteries which, as

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Proust observes, 'have their explanation probably only in other worlds and a presentiment of which is precisely what moves us most in life and in art.' One result of such a work of fiction is to arouse this sense of otherness even in prosaic surroundings and in conditions of disturbance, whether rapturous or threatening. In Howard's work it is the threat that predominates, as when in *Something in Disguise* human life is likened to 'some kind of tightrope; if you were on it and didn't look down, everything seemed easy; but if you ever began to look down . . .' Like all writers who deal effectively with supernaturalist themes, Elizabeth Jane Howard both identifies and analyses the insecurities peculiar to her time; while through her resourceful exploitation of traditional literary methodologies she extends their relevance and their potential range. As one of her characters remarks at the conclusion of *The Long View*, 'this isn't the end: it may very well be the beginning.' That comment certainly applies to the tales in *Three Miles Up*. Reader, begin here.

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THERE was absolutely nothing like it.

An unoriginal conclusion, and one that he had drawn a hundred times during the last fortnight. Clifford would make some subtle and intelligent comparison, but he, John, could only continue to repeat that it was quite unlike anything else. It had been Clifford's idea, which, considering Clifford, was surprising. When you looked at him, you would not suppose him capable of it. However, John reflected, he had been ill, some sort of breakdown these clever people went in for, and that might account for his uncharacteristic idea of hiring a boat and travelling on canals. On the whole, John had to admit, it was a good idea. He had never been on a canal in his life, although he had been in almost every kind of boat, and thought he knew a good deal about them; so much indeed, that he had embarked on the venture in a light-hearted, almost a patronising manner. But it was not

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nearly as simple as he had imagined. Clifford, of course, knew nothing about boats; but he had admitted that almost everything had gone wrong with a kind of devilish versatility which had almost frightened him. However, that was all over, and John, who had learned painfully all about the boat and her engine, felt that the former at least had run her gamut of disaster. They had run out of food, out of petrol, and out of water; had dropped their windlass into the deepest lock, and, more humiliating, their boathook into a side-pond. The head had come off the hammer. They had been disturbed for one whole night by a curious rustling in the cabin, like a rat in a paper bag, when there was no paper, and, so far as they knew, no rat. The battery had failed and had had to be recharged. Clifford had put his elbow through an already cracked window in the cabin. A large piece of rope had wound itself round the propeller with a malignant intensity which required three men and half a morning to unravel. And so on, until now there was really nothing left to go wrong, unless one of them drowned, and surely it was impossible to drown in a canal.

‘I suppose one might easily drown in a lock?’ he asked aloud.

‘We must be careful not to fall into one,’ Clifford replied.

‘What?’ John steered with fierce concentration, and

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never heard anything people said to him for the first time, almost on principle.

'I said we must be careful not to fall *into* a lock.'

'Oh. Well there aren't any more now until after the Junction. Anyway, we haven't yet, so there's really no reason why we should start now. I only wanted to know whether we'd drown if we did.'

'Sharon might.'

'What?'

'Sharon might.'

'Better warn her then. She seems agile enough.' His concentrated frown returned, and he settled down again to the wheel. John didn't mind where they went, or what happened, so long as he handled the boat, and all things considered, he handled her remarkably well. Clifford planned and John steered: and until two days ago they had both quarrelled and argued over a smoking and unusually temperamental primus. Which reminded Clifford of Sharon. Her advent and the weather were really their two unadulterated strokes of good fortune. There had been no rain, and Sharon had, as it were, dropped from the blue on to the boat, where she speedily restored domestic order, stimulated evening conversation, and touched the whole venture with her attractive being: the requisite number of miles each day were achieved, the boat behaved herself, and admirable meals were steadily

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and regularly prepared. She had, in fact, identified herself with the journey, without making the slightest effort to control it: a talent which many women were supposed in theory to possess, when, in fact, Clifford reflected gloomily, most of them were bored with the whole thing, or tried to dominate it.

Her advent was a remarkable, almost a miraculous piece of luck. He had, after a particularly ill-fed day, and their failure to dine at a small hotel, desperately telephoned all the women he knew who seemed in the least suitable (and they were surprisingly few), with no success. They had spent a miserable evening, John determined to argue about everything, and he, Clifford, refusing to speak; until, both in a fine state of emotional tension, they had turned in for the night. While John snored, Clifford had lain distraught, his resentment and despair circling round John and then touching his own smallest and most random thoughts; until his mind found no refuge and he was left, divided from it, hostile and afraid, watching it in terror racing on in the dark like some malignant machine utterly out of his control.

The next day things had proved no better between them, and they had continued throughout the morning in a silence which was only occasionally and elaborately broken. They had tied up for lunch beside a wood, which hung heavy and magnificent over the canal. There

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was a small clearing beside which John then proposed to moor, but Clifford failed to achieve the considerable leap necessary to stop the boat; and they had drifted helplessly past it. John flung him a line, but it was not until the boat was secured, and they were safely in the cabin, that the storm had broken. John, in attempting to light the primus, spilt a quantity of paraffin on Clifford's bunk. Instantly all his despair of the previous evening had contracted. He hated John so much that he could have murdered him. They both lost their tempers, and for the ensuing hour and a half had conducted a blazing quarrel, which, even at the time, secretly horrified them both in its intensity.

It had finally ended with John striding out of the cabin, there being no more to say. He had returned almost at once, however.

'I say, Clifford. Come and look at this.'

'At what?'

'Outside, on the bank.'

For some unknown reason Clifford did get up and did look. Lying face downwards quite still on the ground, with her arms clasping the trunk of a large tree, was a girl.

'How long has she been there?'

'She's asleep.'

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'She can't have been asleep all the time. She must have heard some of what we said.'

'Anyway, who is she? What is she doing here?'

Clifford looked at her again. She was wearing a dark twill shirt and dark trousers, and her hair hung over her face, so that it was almost invisible. 'I don't know. I suppose she's alive?'

John jumped cautiously ashore. 'Yes, she's alive all right. Funny way to lie.'

'Well, it's none of our business anyway. Anyone can lie on a bank if they want to.'

'Yes, but she must have come in the middle of our row, and it does seem queer to stay, and then go to sleep.'

'Extraordinary,' said Clifford wearily. Nothing was really extraordinary, he felt, nothing. 'Are we moving on?'

'Let's eat first. I'll do it.'

'Oh, I'll do it.'

The girl stirred, unclasped her arms, and sat up. They had all stared at each other for a moment, the girl slowly pushing the hair from her forehead. Then she had said: 'If you will give me a meal, I'll cook it.' Afterwards they had left her to wash up, and walked about the wood, while Clifford suggested to John that they ask the

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girl to join them. 'I'm sure she'd come,' he said. 'She didn't seem at all clear about what she was doing.'

'We can't just pick somebody up out of a wood,' said John, scandalised.

'Where do you suggest we pick them up? If we don't have someone, this holiday will be a failure.'

'We don't know anything about her.'

'I can't see that that matters very much. She seems to cook well. We can at least ask her.'

'All right. Ask her then. She won't come.'

When they returned to the boat, she had finished the washing up, and was sitting on the floor of the cockpit, with her arms stretched behind her head. Clifford asked her; and she accepted as though she had known them a long time and they were simply inviting her to tea.

'Well, but look here,' said John, thoroughly taken aback. 'What about your things?'

'My things?' she looked inquiringly and a little defensively from one to the other.

'Clothes and so on. Or haven't you got any? Are you a gipsy or something? Where do you come from?'

'I am not a gipsy,' she began patiently; when Clifford, thoroughly embarrassed and ashamed, interrupted her.

'Really, it's none of our business who you are, and

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there is absolutely no need for us to ask you anything. I'm very glad you will come with us, although I feel we should warn you that we are new to this life, and anything might happen.'

'No need to warn me,' she said and smiled gratefully at him.

After that, they both felt bound to ask her nothing; John because he was afraid of being made to look foolish by Clifford, and Clifford because he had stopped John.

'Good Lord, we shall never get rid of her; and she'll fuss about condensation,' John had muttered aggressively as he started the engine. But she was very young, and did not fuss about anything. She had told them her name, and settled down, immediately and easily: gentle, assured and unselfconscious to a degree remarkable in one so young. They were never sure how much she had overheard them, for she gave no sign of having heard anything. A friendly but uncommunicative creature.

The map on the engine box started to flap, and immediately John asked, 'Where are we?'

'I haven't been watching, I'm afraid. Wait a minute.'

'We just passed under a railway bridge,' John said helpfully.

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'Right. Yes. About four miles from the Junction, I think. What is the time?'

'Five-thirty.'

'Which way are we going when we get to the Junction?'

'We haven't time for the big loop. I must be back in London by the 15th.'

'The alternative is to go up as far as the basin, and then simply turn round and come back, and who wants to do that?'

'Well, we'll know the route then. It'll be much easier coming back.'

Clifford did not reply. He was not attracted by the route being easier, and he wanted to complete his original plan.

'Let us wait till we get there.' Sharon appeared with tea and marmalade sandwiches.

'All right, let's wait.' Clifford was relieved.

'It will be almost dark by six-thirty. I think we ought to have a plan,' John said. 'Thank you, Sharon.'

'Have tea first.' She curled herself on to the floor with her back to the cabin doors and a mug in her hands.

They were passing rows of little houses with gardens that backed on to the canal. They were long narrow strips, streaked with cinder paths, and crowded

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with vegetables and chicken huts, fruit trees and perambulators; sometimes ending with fat white ducks, and sometimes in a tiny patch of grass with a bench on it.

'Would you rather keep ducks or sit on a bench?' asked Clifford.

'Keep ducks,' said John promptly. 'More useful. Sharon wouldn't mind which she did. Would you, Sharon?' He liked saying her name, Clifford noticed. 'You could be happy anywhere, couldn't you?' He seemed to be presenting her with the widest possible choice.

'I might *be* anywhere,' she answered after a moment's thought.

'Well you happen to be on a canal, and very nice for us.'

'In a wood, and then on a canal,' she replied contentedly, bending her smooth dark head over her mug.

'Going to be fine tomorrow,' said John. He was always a little embarrassed at any mention of how they found her and his subsequent rudeness.

'Yes. I like it when the whole sky is so red and burning and it begins to be cold.'

'Are you cold?' said John, wanting to worry about it: but she tucked her dark shirt into her trousers and answered composedly:

'Oh no. I am never cold.'

They drank their tea in a comfortable silence.

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Clifford started to read his map, and then said they were almost on to another sheet. 'New country,' he said with satisfaction. 'I've never been here before.'

'You make it sound like an exploration; doesn't he, Sharon?' said John.

'Is that a bad thing?' She collected the mugs. 'I am going to put these away. You will call me if I am wanted for anything.' And she went into the cabin again.

There was a second's pause, a minute tribute to her departure; and, lighting cigarettes, they settled down to stare at the long silent stretch of water ahead.

John thought about Sharon. He thought rather desperately that really they still knew nothing about her, and that when they went back to London, they would, in all probability, never see her again. Perhaps Clifford would fall in love with her, and she would naturally reciprocate, because she was so young and Clifford was reputed to be so fascinating and intelligent, and because women were always foolish and loved the wrong man. He thought all these things with equal intensity, glanced cautiously at Clifford, and supposed he was thinking about her; then wondered what she would be like in London, clad in anything else but her dark trousers and shirt. The engine coughed; and he turned to it in relief.

Clifford was making frantic calculations of time and distance; stretching their time, and diminishing the

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distance, and groaning that with the utmost optimism they could not be made to fit. He was interrupted by John swearing at the engine, and then for no particular reason he remembered Sharon, and reflected with pleasure how easily she left the mind when she was not present, how she neither obsessed nor possessed one in her absence, but was charming to see.

The sun had almost set when they reached the Junction, and John slowed down to neutral while they made up their minds. To the left was the straight cut which involved the longer journey originally planned; and curving away to the right was the short arm which John advocated. The canal was fringed with rushes, and there was one small cottage with no light in it. Clifford went into the cabin to tell Sharon where they were, and then, as they drifted slowly in the middle of the Junction, John suddenly shouted: 'Clifford! What's the third turning?'

'There are only two.' Clifford reappeared. 'Sharon is busy with dinner.'

'No, look. Surely that is another cut.'

Clifford stared ahead. 'Can't see it.'

'Just to the right of the cottage. Look. It's not so dark as all that.'

Then Clifford saw it very plainly. It seemed to wind away from the cottage on a fairly steep curve, and

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the rushes shrouding it from anything but the closest view were taller than the rest.

'Have another look at the map. I'll reverse for a bit.'

'Found it. It's just another arm. Probably been abandoned,' said Clifford eventually.

The boat had swung round; and now they could see the continuance of the curve dully gleaming ahead, and banked by reeds.

'Well, what shall we do?'

'Getting dark. Let's go up a little way, and moor. Nice quiet mooring.'

'With some nice quiet mudbanks,' said John grimly. 'Nobody uses that.'

'How do you know?'

'Well, look at it. All those rushes, and it's sure to be thick with weed.'

'Don't go up it then. But we shall go aground if we drift about like this.'

'I don't mind going up it,' said John doggedly. 'What about Sharon?'

'What about her?'

'Tell her about it.'

'We've found a third turning,' Clifford called above the noise of the primus through the cabin door.

'One you had not expected?'

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'Yes. It looks very wild. We were thinking of going up it.'

'Didn't you say you wanted to explore?' she smiled at him.

'You are quite ready to try it? I warn you we shall probably run hard aground. Look out for bumps with the primus.'

'I am quite ready, and I am quite sure we shan't run aground,' she answered with charming confidence in their skill.

They moved slowly forward in the dusk. Why they did not run aground, Clifford could not imagine: John really was damned good at it. The canal wound and wound, and the reeds grew not only thick on each bank, but in clumps across the canal. The light drained out of the sky into the water and slowly drowned there; the trees and the banks became heavy and black.

Clifford began to clear things away from the heavy dew which had begun to rise. After two journeys he remained in the cabin, while John crawled on, alone. Once, on a bend, John thought he saw a range of hills ahead with lights on them, but when he was round the curve, and had time to look again he could see no hills: only a dark indeterminate waste of country stretched ahead.

He was beginning to consider the necessity of

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mooring, when they came to a bridge; and shortly after, he saw a dark mass which he took to be houses. When the boat had crawled for another fifty yards or so, he stopped the engine, and drifted in absolute silence to the bank. The houses, about half a dozen of them, were much nearer than he had at first imagined, but there were no lights to be seen. Distance is always deceptive in the dark, he thought, and jumped ashore with a bow line. When, a few minutes later, he took a sounding with the boathook, the water proved unexpectedly deep; and he concluded that they had by incredible good fortune moored at the village wharf. He made everything fast, and joined the others in the cabin with mixed feelings of pride and resentment; that he should have achieved so much under such difficult conditions, and that they (by 'they' he meant Clifford), should have contributed so little towards the achievement. He found Clifford reading Bradshaw's *Guide to the Canals and Navigable Rivers* in one corner, and Sharon, with her hair pushed back behind her ears, bending over the primus with a knife. Her ears are pale, exactly the colour of her face, he thought; wanted to touch them; then felt horribly ashamed, and hated Clifford.

'Let's have a look at Bradshaw,' he said, as though he had not noticed Clifford reading it.

But Clifford handed him the book in the most

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friendly manner, remarking that he couldn't see where they were. 'In fact you have surpassed yourself with your brilliant navigation. We seem to be miles from anywhere.'

'What about your famous ordnance?'

'It's not on any sheet I have. The new one I thought we should use only covers the loop we planned. There is precisely three quarters of a mile of this canal shown on the present sheet and then we run off the map. I suppose there must once have been trade here, but I cannot imagine what, or where.'

'I expect things change,' said Sharon. 'Here is the meal.'

How can you see to cook?' asked John, eyeing his plate ravenously.

'There is a candle.'

'Yes, but we've selfishly appropriated that.'

'Should I need more light?' she asked, and looked troubled.

'There's no should about it. I just don't know how you do it, that's all. Chips exactly the right colour, and you never drop anything. It's marvellous.'

She smiled a little uncertainly at him and lit another candle. 'Luck, probably,' she said, and set it on the table.

They ate their meal, and John told them about the mooring. 'Some sort of village. I think we're moored at

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the wharf. I couldn't find any rings without the torch, so I've used the anchor.' This small shaft was intended for Clifford, who had dropped the spare torch-battery in the washing-up bowl, and forgotten to buy another. But it was only a small shaft, and immediately afterwards John felt much better. His aggression slowly left him, and he felt nothing but a peaceful and well-fed affection for the other two.

'Extraordinary cut off this is,' he remarked over coffee.

'It is very pleasant in here. Warm, and extremely full of us.'

'Yes. I know. A quiet village, though, you must admit.'

'I shall believe in your village when I see it.'

'Then you would believe it?'

'No he wouldn't, Sharon. Not if he didn't want to, and couldn't find it on the map. That map!'

The conversation turned again to their remoteness, and to how cut off one liked to be and at what point it ceased to be desirable; to boats, telephones, and, finally, canals: which, Clifford maintained, possessed the perfect proportions of urbanity and solitude.

Hours later, when they had turned in for the night, Clifford reviewed the conversation, together with others they had had, and remembered with surprise how little

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Sharon had actually said. She listened to everything and occasionally, when they appealed to her, made some small composed remark which was oddly at variance with their passionate interest. 'She has an elusive quality of freshness about her,' he thought, 'which is neither naïve nor stupid nor dull, and she invokes no responsibility. She does not want us to know what she was, or why we found her as we did, and curiously, I, at least, do not want to know. She is what women ought to be,' he concluded with sudden pleasure; and slept.

He woke the next morning to find it very late, and stretched out his hand to wake John.

'We've all overslept. Look at the time.'

'Good Lord! Better wake Sharon.'

Sharon lay between them on the floor, which they had ceded her because, oddly enough, it was the widest and most comfortable bed. She seemed profoundly asleep, but at the mention of her name sat up immediately, and rose, almost as though she had not been asleep at all.

The morning routine which, involving the clothing of three people and shaving of two of them, was necessarily a long and complicated business, began. Sharon boiled water, and Clifford, grumbling gently, hoisted himself out of his bunk and repaired with a steaming jug to the cockpit. He put the jug on a seat, lifted the canvas

awning, and leaned out. It was absolutely grey and still; a little white mist hung over the canal, and the country stretched out desolate and unkempt on every side with no sign of a living creature. The village, he thought suddenly: John's village: and was possessed of a perilous uncertainty and fear. I am getting worse, he thought, this holiday is doing me no good. I am mad. I imagined that he said we moored by a village wharf. For several seconds he stood gripping the gunwale, and searching desperately for anything, huts, a clump of trees, which could in the darkness have been mistaken for a village. But there was nothing near the boat except tall rank rushes which did not move at all. Then, when his suspense was becoming unbearable, John joined him with another steaming jug of water.

'We shan't get anywhere at this rate,' he began; and then . . . 'Hullo! Where's my village?'

'I was wondering that,' said Clifford. He could almost have wept with relief, and quickly began to shave, deeply ashamed of his private panic.

'Can't understand it,' John was saying. It was no joke, Clifford decided, as he listened to his hearty puzzled ruminations.

At breakfast John continued to speculate upon what he had or had not seen, and Sharon listened intently while she filled the coffee pot and cut bread. Once or

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twice she met Clifford's eye with a glance of discreet amusement.

'I must be mad, or else the whole place is haunted,' finished John comfortably. These two possibilities seemed to relieve him of any further anxiety in the matter, as he ate a huge breakfast and set about greasing the engine.

'Well,' said Clifford, when he was alone with Sharon. 'What do you make of that?'

'It is easy to be deceived in such matters,' she answered perfunctorily.

'Evidently. Still, John is an unlikely candidate you must admit. Here, I'll help you dry.'

'Oh no. It is what I am here for.'

'Not entirely, I hope.'

'Not entirely.' She smiled and relinquished the cloth. John eventually announced that they were ready to start. Clifford, who had assumed that they were to recover their journey, was surprised, and a little alarmed, to find John intent upon continuing it. He seemed undeterred by the state of the canal, which, as Clifford immediately pointed out, rendered navigation both arduous and unrewarding. He announced that the harder it was, the more he liked it, adding very firmly that 'anyway we must see what happens.'

'We shan't have time to do anything else.'

'Thought you wanted to explore.'

Three Miles Up

'I do, but . . . what do you think, Sharon?'

'I think John will have to be a very good navigator to manage that.' She indicated the rush and weed-ridden reach before them. 'Do you think it's possible?'

'Of course it's possible. I'll probably need some help though.'

'I'll help you,' she said.

So on they went.

They made incredibly slow progress. John enjoys showing off his powers to her, thought Clifford, half amused, half exasperated, as he struggled for the fourth time in an hour to scrape weeds off the propeller.

Sharon eventually retired to cook lunch.

'Surprising amount of water here,' John said suddenly.

'Oh?'

'Well, I mean, with all this weed and stuff, you'd expect the canal to have silted up. I'm sure nobody uses it.'

'The whole thing is extraordinary.'

'Is it too late in the year for birds?' asked Clifford later.

'No, I don't think so. Why?'

'I haven't heard one, have you?'

'Haven't noticed, I'm afraid. There's someone anyway. First sign of life.'

Three Miles Up

An old man stood near the bank watching them. He was dressed in corduroy and wore a straw hat.

'Good morning,' shouted John, as they drew nearer.

He made no reply, but inclined his head slightly. He seemed very old. He was leaning on a scythe, and as they drew almost level with him, he turned away and began slowly cutting rushes. A pile of them lay neatly stacked beside him.

'Where does this canal go? Is there a village further on?' Clifford and John asked simultaneously. He seemed not to hear, and as they chugged steadily past, Clifford was about to suggest that they stop and ask again, when he called after them: 'Three miles up you'll find the village. Three miles up that is,' and turned away to his rushes again.

'Well, now we know something, anyway,' said John.

'We don't even know what the village is called.'

'Soon find out. Only three miles.'

'Three miles!' said Clifford darkly. 'That might mean anything.'

'Do you want to turn back?'

'Oh no, not now. I want to see this village now. My curiosity is thoroughly aroused.'

'Shouldn't think there'll be anything to see. Never been in such a wild spot. Look at it.'

Three Miles Up

Clifford looked at it. Half wilderness, half marsh, dank and grey and still, with single trees bare of their leaves; clumps of hawthorn that might once have been hedge, sparse and sharp with berries; and, in the distance, hills and an occasional wood: these were all one could see, beyond the lines of rushes which edged the canal winding ahead.

They stopped for a lengthy meal, which Sharon described as lunch and tea together, it being so late; and then, appalled at how little daylight was left, continued.

'We've hardly been any distance at all,' said John forlornly. 'Good thing there were no locks. I shouldn't think they'd have worked if there were.'

'*Much* more than three miles,' he said, about two hours later. Darkness was descending and it was becoming very cold.

'Better stop,' said Clifford.

'Not yet. I'm determined to reach that village.'

'Dinner is ready,' said Sharon sadly. 'It will be cold.'

'Let's stop.'

'You have your meal. I'll call if I want you.'

Sharon looked at them, and Clifford shrugged his shoulders. 'Come on. I will. I'm tired of this.'

They shut the cabin doors. John could hear the pleasant clatter of their meal, and just as he was coming

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to the end of the decent interval which he felt must elapse before he gave in, they passed under a bridge, the first of the day, and, clutching at any straw, he immediately assumed that it prefaced the village. 'I think we're nearly there,' he called.

Clifford opened the door. 'The village?'

'No, a bridge. Can't be far now.'

'You're mad, John. It's pitch dark.'

'You can see the bridge though.'

'Yes. Why not moor under it?'

'Too late. Can't turn round in this light, and she's not good at reversing. Must be nearly there. You go back, I don't need you.'

Clifford shut the door again. He was beginning to feel irritated with John behaving in this childish manner and showing off to impress Sharon. It was amusing in the morning, but really he was carrying it a bit far. Let him manage the thing himself then. When, a few minutes later, John shouted that they had reached the sought after village, Clifford merely pulled back the little curtain over a cabin window, rubbed the condensation, and remarked that he could see nothing. 'No light at least.'

'He is happy anyhow,' said Sharon peaceably.

'Going to have a look round,' said John, slamming the cabin doors and blowing his nose.

'Surely you'll eat first?'

Three Miles Up

'If you've left anything. My God it's cold! It's *unnaturally* cold.'

'We won't be held responsible if he dies of exposure will we?' said Clifford.

She looked at him, hesitated a moment, but did not reply, and placed a steaming plate in front of John. She doesn't want us to quarrel, Clifford thought, and with an effort of friendliness he asked: 'What does tonight's village look like?'

'Much the same. Only one or two houses you know. But the old man called it a village.' He seemed uncommunicative; Clifford thought he was sulking. But after eating the meal, he suddenly announced, almost apologetically, 'I don't think I shall walk round. I'm absolutely worn out. You go if you like. I shall start turning in.'

'All right. I'll have a look. You've had a hard day.'

Clifford pulled on a coat and went outside. It was, as John said, incredibly cold and almost overwhelmingly silent. The clouds hung very low over the boat, and mist was rising everywhere from the ground, but he could dimly discern the black huddle of cottages lying on a little slope above the bank against which the boat was moored. He did actually set foot on shore, but his shoe sank immediately into a marshy hole. He withdrew it, and changed his mind. The prospect of groping round

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those dark and silent houses became suddenly distasteful, and he joined the others with the excuse that it was too cold and that he also was tired.

A little later, he lay half conscious in a kind of restless trance, with John sleeping heavily opposite him. His mind seemed full of foreboding, fear of something unknown and intangible: he thought of them lying in warmth on the cold secret canal with desolate miles of water behind and probably beyond; the old man and the silent houses; John, cut off and asleep, and Sharon, who lay on the floor beside him. Immediately he was filled with a sudden and most violent desire for her, even to touch her, for her to know that he was awake.

'Sharon,' he whispered; 'Sharon, Sharon,' and stretched down his fingers to her in the dark.

Instantly her hand was in his, each smooth and separate finger warmly clasped. She did not move or speak, but his relief was indescribable and for a long while he lay in an ecstasy of delight and peace, until his mind slipped imperceptibly with her fingers into oblivion.

When he woke he found John absent and Sharon standing over the primus. 'He's outside,' she said.

'Have I overslept again?'

'It is late. I am boiling water for you now.'

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'We'd better try and get some supplies this morning.'

'There is no village,' she said, in a matter of fact tone.

'What?'

'John says not. But we have enough food, if you don't mind this queer milk from a tin.'

'No, I don't mind,' he replied, watching her affectionately. 'It doesn't really surprise me,' he added after a moment.

'The village?'

'No village. Yesterday I should have minded awfully. Is that you, do you think?'

'Perhaps.'

'It doesn't surprise you about the village at all, does it? Do you love me?'

She glanced at him quickly, a little shocked, and said quietly: 'Don't you know?' then added: 'It doesn't surprise me.'

John seemed very disturbed. 'I don't like it,' he kept saying as they shaved. 'Can't understand it at all. I could have sworn there were houses last night. You saw them didn't you?'

'Yes.'

'Well, don't you think it's very odd?'

Three Miles Up

'I do.'

'Everything looks the same as yesterday morning. I don't like it.'

'It's an adventure you must admit.'

'Yes, but I've had enough of it. I suggest we turn back.'

Sharon suddenly appeared, and, seeing her, Clifford knew that he did not want to go back. He remembered her saying: 'Didn't you say you wanted to explore?' She would think him weak-hearted if they turned back all those dreary miles with nothing to show for it. At breakfast, he exerted himself in persuading John to the same opinion. John finally agreed to one more day, but, in turn, extracted a promise that they would then go back whatever happened. Clifford agreed to this, and Sharon for some inexplicable reason laughed at them both. So that eventually they prepared to set off in an atmosphere of general good humour.

Sharon began to fill the water tank with their four-gallon can. It seemed too heavy for her, and John dropped the starter and leapt to her assistance.

She let him take the can and held the funnel for him. Together they watched the rich even stream of water disappear.

'You shouldn't try to do that,' he said. 'You'll hurt yourself.'

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'Gipsies do it,' she said.

'I'm awfully sorry about that. You know I am.'

'I should not have minded if you had thought I was a gipsy.'

'I do like you,' he said, not looking at her. 'I do like you. You won't disappear altogether when this is over, will you?'

'You probably won't find I'll disappear for good,' she replied comfortingly.

'Come on,' shouted Clifford.

It's all right for *him* to talk to her, John thought, as he struggled to swing the starter. He just doesn't like me doing it; and he wished, as he had begun often to do, that Clifford was not there.

They had spasmodic engine trouble in the morning, which slowed them down; and the consequent halts, with the difficulty they experienced of mooring anywhere (the banks seemed nothing but marsh), were depressing and cold. Their good spirits evaporated: by lunchtime John was plainly irritable and frightened, and Clifford had begun to hate the grey silent land on either side, with the woods and hills which remained so consistently distant. They both wanted to give it up by then, but John felt bound to stick to his promise, and Clifford was secretly sure that Sharon wished to continue.

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While she was preparing another late lunch, they saw a small boy who stood on what once had been the towpath watching them. He was bare-headed, wore corduroy, and had no shoes. He held a long reed, the end of which he chewed as he stared at them.

'Ask him where we are,' said John; and Clifford asked.

He took the reed out of his mouth, but did not reply.

'Where do you live then?' asked Clifford as they drew almost level with him.

'I told you. Three miles up,' he said; and then he gave a sudden little shriek of fear, dropped the reed, and turned to run down the bank the way they had come. Once he looked back, stumbled and fell, picked himself up sobbing, and ran faster. Sharon had appeared with lunch a moment before, and together they listened to his gasping cries growing fainter and fainter, until he had run himself out of their sight.

'What on earth frightened him?' said Clifford.

'I don't know. Unless it was Sharon popping out of the cabin like that.'

'Nonsense. But he was a very frightened little boy. And, I say, do you realise . . .'

'He was a very foolish little boy,' Sharon interrupted. She was angry, Clifford noticed with surprise,

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really angry, white and trembling, and with a curious expression which he did not like.

'We might have got something out of him,' said John sadly.

'Too late now,' Sharon said. She had quite recovered herself.

They saw no one else. They journeyed on throughout the afternoon; it grew colder, and at the same time more and more airless and still. When the light began to fail, Sharon disappeared as usual to the cabin. The canal became more tortuous, and John asked Clifford to help him with the turns. Clifford complied unwillingly: he did not want to leave Sharon, but as it had been he who had insisted on their continuing, he could hardly refuse. The turns were nerve wracking, as the canal was very narrow and the light grew worse and worse.

'All right if we stop soon?' asked John eventually.

'Stop now if you like.'

'Well, we'll try and find a tree to tie up to. This swamp is awful. Can't think how that child ran.'

'That child . . .' began Clifford anxiously; but John, who had been equally unnerved by the incident, and did not want to think about it, interrupted. 'Is there a tree ahead anywhere?'

'Can't see one. There's a hell of a bend coming though. Almost back on itself. Better slow a bit more.'

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‘Can’t. We’re right down as it is.’

They crawled round, clinging to the outside bank, which seemed always to approach them, its rushes to rub against their bows, although the wheel was hard over. John grunted with relief; and they both stared ahead for the next turn.

They were presented with the most terrible spectacle. The canal immediately broadened, until no longer a canal but a sheet, an infinity, of water stretched ahead; oily, silent, and still, as far as the eye could see, with no country edging it, nothing but water to the low grey sky above it. John had almost immediately cut out the engine, and now he tried desperately to start it again, in order to turn round. Clifford instinctively glanced behind them. He saw no canal at all, no inlet, but grasping and close to the stern of the boat, the reeds and rushes of a marshy waste closing in behind them. He stumbled to the cabin doors and pulled them open. It was very neat and tidy in there, but empty. Only one stern door of the cabin was free of its catch, and it flapped irregularly backwards and forwards with their movements in the boat.

There was no sign of Sharon at all.

Perfect Love

IT MUST have been in about 1928 that I heard Mielli.

I went, I remember, in a frenzy of boredom. I had I been to a party given by an excellent, very dull surgeon in Wimpole Street, and, after nearly an hour of drinking and standing in a crowd, I broke away with some suitably convincing lie and walked thankfully out into the dark drizzle of the street.

Outside, the question arose immediately of where to obtain shelter which did not involve conversation or alcohol. I was not inclined to dine, and I did not particularly want to go home. Employed with these unconstructive thoughts, I reached Wigmore Street, when it struck me that I was very near the Wigmore Hall. The prospect of hearing somebody play the Brahms Paganini Variations and two or three Beethoven Sonatas, with either unimpassioned skill or nervous inaccurate vigour, seemed soothing. The audience there would be hysterically

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quiet, I reflected; they would be comprised almost entirely of the Rabbit's friends and relations. It was a quarter to eight.

It was not until I had paid for my seat and purchased a glossy programme that I realised what the evening was to be.

Maria Mielli was a distant name to me: if somebody had mentioned it on Charing Cross Station I should have been uncertain of her career, but I think I should have remembered that she sang. I might even have thought that she was dead.

The photograph on the front of the programme had clearly been taken some time ago. She might be really old by now, I thought, and began to regret my hasty decision. I glanced at the audience. There were not many of them, and they told me nothing. I glanced at the programme. Mozart, Donizetti, Meyerbeer, Verdi, and what, at the end of the programme, I rightly guessed to be pseudo-folk trash. I considered leaving, but the audience was so small that some compunction for the wretched (and probably aged) artist who was to sing to such a void of red plush enjoined me to remain.

Punctually at eight o'clock a gentleman opened the Steinway. A long pause ensued; too long, I felt, for the audience, who began roving the hall in search of conversation, central heating, or a new seat.

Eventually, however, the mahogany door swung back and a small woman in black lace walked on to the platform with her accompanist. She looked considerably younger than I had expected; a pleasant rather fragile creature, very pale, and very clearly not English. It was not until she put her handkerchief on the piano desk, whence it fell on to the keyboard, that I saw how sadly nervous she was. People were clapping in nondescript encouragement, and I felt she was far from encouraged. But she leaned faintly against the piano, glanced at her accompanist, and began.

I did not know the Pergolesi with which she began, but although I cannot therefore remember the aria at all clearly, I remember that she sang it very well. When, after perfunctory applause, she continued with one of the two pieces from Mozart opera which I knew (opera, I need hardly remark, was not my musical subject), I realised that she was not only no amateur but very far from played out as a professional, although her nervousness certainly suggested the one or the other.

She reached her first interval safely, but not remarkably, and vanished through the door. The audience resumed its nomadic behaviour for ten minutes or so. The next part of the programme, I imagined, constituted the main test.

She returned to sing the *Grand Air of Catherine*,

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and *Caro Nome*, and to appear at once a dramatic actress and very much more attractive than I had at first thought. Indeed, at one moment in the *Verdi*, I had a distinct picture of her at twenty; very beautiful, and in love. Her voice was certainly very beautiful; too big for the hall, but singularly pure and easy. In the midst of the applause, a man shouted from the back of the hall in Italian, and she smiled. '*Ritorna vincitor*', he insisted; and she inclined her head towards him. The atmosphere seemed suddenly to have lightened to one of attention and pleasure. I was unprepared for what followed; I was unfamiliar with *Aida*. A torrent of bitterness and passion poured from her. She advanced from the piano, shedding her appearance and her surroundings, and compelling each one of us listening to hold our breath for her. I have heard the opera since, and it is always Mielli that I see and hear at the end of the first act; the same flock of shivers course down my spine, and at the end I see her standing on the small platform bowing to the wild thin clapping which ensued. I saw then what she must most certainly have been, and was quite unable to see why she appeared in the Wigmore Hall with a piano, singing, as she afterwards sang, a quantity of works well beneath her powers and merit.

THE TIMES: OCTOBER 31ST, 1931

We regret to announce the death in London of Madame Maria Mielli, the well-known operatic soprano. Born Maria Dina Starace (her reasons for adopting the professional name of Mielli were never made known), at Acquaferrata in 1880, she studied for five years under Bosci at Milan (reputedly at the expense of a benefactor whose identity remained unknown to her). One of her earliest appearances was as Rosina at La Scala, when she made an immediate favourable impression. Subsequently she appeared at the leading Italian opera houses in the usual parts, her singing in Bellini's NORMA causing a particular sensation. She next visited various foreign capitals where she was excellently received: her tour included an appearance in Russia. In 1910 she retired from her profession and settled in England. In 1925 she reappeared in London and a number of Continental musical centres, giving concert recitals; at which it was clear that her powers were little diminished. She continued these recitals at intervals until her death. Critics regarded her voice as unrivalled in purity of tone and width of register; and on her day she was also an unusually powerful dramatic actress. Madame Mielli was unmarried.

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There was nothing but this cutting pasted into the first page, but even looking casually at the large battered book (my father had a habit of carrying these notebooks everywhere with him while he was engaged upon them), I saw that his enquiries, and findings, seemed remarkably exhaustive. Here, perhaps, I had better explain about my father. This will not take very long, as I know little more, or perhaps by virtue of being his only son, rather less, about him than almost any other well-informed person. Most people know that Bertram Waring published an admirable list of authors. A few friends know that he liked wine, travel, and, except for an occasional new face round his dinner table, a quite remarkable degree of solitude. His housekeeper, who was with him for over forty years (I never knew my mother), knows that until his death at eighty-four he required two additional meals, eaten at times not generally reserved for the purpose, and only three hours' sleep. But except for these grains of information, I, his son, know only that he spent countless hours in mysterious research. His method as a parent was to give me, at a very early age, complete freedom and independence from him: and although he was always amiably polite to me, he made it very clear that he preferred us to live apart. 'Relatives should separate at the earliest possible moment,' he said to me, 'unless they want to make a profession of being related.'

Now he was dead. The world was filled with a mournful curiosity, and I, as sole executor and only known surviving relative, was pressed to uncover something, at least, of his personality; to discover a little of his life and private pursuits; and above all to ascertain whether he had, or had not, written anything which his devoted and stricken firm (in which I was a junior partner), could publish.

I must emphasise that my investigations were not actuated by any very personal consideration. In spite of working in his firm, and dining with him in his house once a month (except when he was abroad), I had learned so early to consider him objectively that even his death affected me in an impersonal manner. I knew that as a firm we had lost our mainspring; I knew that the age had lost a kind of literary lightning conductor which it could ill afford to lose: but I did not in any sense feel that I had lost a father, or even, indeed, a very close friend. I set about sorting, and destroying or preserving, his innumerable papers with no more than a profound, and I think very respectful, interest.

Although it is common knowledge that my father never wrote a book, it is perhaps not generally realised that he never wrote, or at least published, a line on any subject whatever. Even his famous letters were so thoroughly written in the third person that his identity

never directly emerged. He seems to have had a horror of committing himself on paper, although he spent his professional life encouraging other people to do so. But that he wrote I had no doubt. How else did he occupy those endless nights alone in his house? He read with a speed and retentive memory commonly attributed only to Wilde. I had been pretty certain long before his death that he wrote, and I discovered, very soon after it, that I was right.

He had left no book behind him, I discovered, or at least nothing which did not require considerable editing, in the form of explanation, information for the uninitiated (my father wrote always with the assumption that his reader was an erudite scholar or specialist in any subject) and rearrangement on a scale which I knew was well beyond my own powers. He seemed to have spent his life in a vast analysis of the artist in relation to society. As well as countless volumes of accumulated evidence, there were nearly a dozen notebooks devoted to his conclusions upon each artist or epoch; but he had come so close to his subject, and was so patently unwilling ever to reach any conclusion which did not, so to speak, fall on to his paper, that the results were hopelessly incomplete. I was reduced in a short time to picking at random any notebook that looked interesting in itself: and since I had found that many of them rambled far from his

purpose, so much as I could see or comprehend his purpose, I gave up any serious attempt to embrace the whole as I thought he had conceived it, and simply indulged myself in this glut of rare red herrings.

In the end, I came upon Mielli.

I shall not attempt to present her story precisely as my father presented it, but have collected and arranged his notes so that the tale, its mysterious and unaccountable tragedy, may be as clear and concise as it is ever likely to be.

I began by studying the first cutting, and my father's note on it, more closely. He spoke of the cutting containing one strange feature, and at first I thought this was simply an illustration of his immense technical knowledge of opera. I was very stupid about that notice. I had a look at the parts Mielli was alleged to have sung, to find them in no way inconsistent or unusual; I even attempted to discover whether a visit to Russia was a startling venture, but although it was not perhaps the general practice of singers to travel so much or so far, the visit did not really seem to justify my father's remark. Perhaps for an Italian singer voluntarily to live in England so much was unusual . . . and then I saw it. It appeared from the notice that at the height of her fame Mielli had resorted to England, a country noted for its

bare tolerance of her art, and remained there without any professional engagements. According to the dates in the cutting, she seemed to have lived like this for fifteen years. When, at the end of that time, she again sang in public, it was in circumstances which I recognised to be either unduly defeatist, or indicative of some frightful tragedy. In the 'twenties the competition among first-rate sopranos was small; and resort exclusively to the concert hall by a beautiful and gifted singer was surely extraordinary. At least, I was now confident that my father had thought so.

These, then, are the events of her career, collected by my father, and edited by me.

Mielli, at the age of fifteen, was almost miraculously removed from the domestic and poverty-stricken squalor in which she had till then lived ('a squalor which', my father remarked, 'her parents increased at the statutory intervals laid down by nature and the Pope') and was sent to Milan, where she was taught to read and write, and to sing.

This change in her fortune was probably less astonishing to her than it would have been to many people. As the seventh child of a man who was prominently out of work, and living in a village the general state of which was such that nothing short of a miracle

could avail either the place or any one of its inhabitants, Mielli was well able to accept easily any change for the better. A miracle was certainly desirable, and even to be expected from time to time, and the sudden appearance one afternoon of a remarkable and remarkably rich patron, who, as it turned out, was to alter her entire life, resulted the same evening in her quitting Acquaferrata never to return.

For nearly five years Mielli remained in Milan, quietly and strenuously developing her voice at the expense of her benefactor, who had no sooner set her down with a letter of introduction in front of a large house in that city, than the coach door slammed, a whip cracked, and he vanished. He neither saw nor wrote to her all the time that she remained there, and she had no idea where he had gone. Little seems to be known of her during those years: undoubtedly she lived an exceedingly quiet and solitary life. She seems never to have communicated with her family, who were probably far too much occupied with innumerable mouths to feed to regret the loss of one. Mielli herself always betrayed a marked dislike for her little brothers and sisters.

She eventually appeared at La Scala in 1899, although it was not until the spring of 1900 that she made her first serious impression, as Gilda. From that moment, professionally she never looked back. However

much public opinion may have been divided on the subject of her origins (and contemporary speculation, to judge by newspapers of that period, was rife), it was unanimous on the point of her art, and so it remained for countless glittering nights to come. Even Verdi was reported to have said to someone equally irascible and awe-inspiring, that had she been born even ten years earlier, he would have been relieved of one despairing problem at least, although he had added characteristically that he doubted not that other problems would have flowed into the gap.

A few months after her first success, Mielli was touring Italy, accompanied by the traditional cloud of poets, librettists, accompanists, designers, potential lovers, and people who thought that she might lend them money. To this casual and floating entourage was soon added a Neapolitan woman engaged as dresser, whose plain aspect quickly became augmented by a deathless devotion to Mielli, and who, in consequence, seems never to have left her, even for a day, for the rest of her mistress's life. Mielli named her Celin, and she was never called anything else.

Shortly after the engagement of Celin, Mielli found it necessary, or desirable, to engage a private secretary, and was advised by some manager to inquire for a French woman. That was the first advertisement which

Mlle Geneviève Augel answered. The second was in another country twenty years later, and it was my father who had inserted it. She had married an Englishman in the Great War; he had been killed, but she had afterwards lived with his family in Wimbledon. It was to my father that she divulged for the first time the following tale. She began by saying that she had judged it wise to exercise the utmost discretion at the time, but that now, so many years later, with Madame unfortunately dead, and with my father's interest in the events of Madame's life, she felt justified in unburdening herself. She was, my father remarks, the quintessence of respectability.

I was very young when the opportunity presented itself to become private secretary to Madame Mielli. Nevertheless, I had lived for over a year in Italy, and was well able to speak and write the language. My duties consisted chiefly in arranging transport, hotels, and professional appointments, and in preserving my employer's privacy when she required it. I did not have many letters to write, although I presented myself each morning for this office. I found Madame herself an easy-going mistress where work was concerned, although of an erratic disposition, both charming

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and alarming, as a companion. She was constantly and suddenly altering her plans, putting those round her to extreme trouble and expense; and she was wildly extravagant herself. The only aspect of her life which commanded her absolute discipline and attention was her singing. If she felt that she was tiring herself; or had talked too much for her voice, she would cancel any engagement, and immediately retire, no matter how important the occasion. She seemed to accept the widespread adulation and notoriety with which she was so early and so suddenly surrounded with perfect ease; although to me, and I believe, to Celin, she would occasionally exclaim over the contrast it presented to her earlier life. The only time that she mentioned her home was when she once described to me at length her departure from it.

She was sent for one afternoon by Vittorio, who kept the wine shop. If she would sing one song she should have gold. A very strange gentleman, a foreigner, required a girl to sing: she was to have three pieces of gold, of which he, Vittorio, would keep two, as it was he who had praised her pretty voice and brought her this good fortune. Her father was asleep and her mother out working, and Maria gladly abandoned her care of

the children, and followed Vittorio. Outside her home Vittorio slapped her because her face was dirty and she had no shoes. 'You will have to sing outside the room. You are too much of a disgrace to be seen,' he shouted, dragging her up the hill.

She sang outside the room. She sang a very sad song, because Vittorio had made her want to cry. When she had finished, she stood waiting for her piece of gold, but Vittorio appeared and told her to sing again. 'Again: for another piece'; and when she stared at him in amazement he hissed: 'He is as rich as Midas. Sing again.' So she sang. Then Vittorio brought her the two pieces of gold, and told her to go home.

She walked slowly back down the steep hill staring at the pieces of gold, curious now about the rich man who had paid so much for two songs.

As she reached the bottom, she heard a coach behind her, and saw two magnificent black horses picking and slipping their way down, with the drag grating on the rough road. They were drawing a closed carriage, and she waited to see what might be seen. Surely this must be the coach of the rich man.

The coach drew level with her and halted. A window was lowered and a long, black gloved

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hand beckoned to her. She approached timidly. From the purple gloom of the coach a high and somewhat guttural voice said: 'You are the girl who sang a few minutes past?'

Still afraid, she nodded. 'Yes, Signor.'

The long black fingers beckoned again, and the voice said: 'Get into the carriage. You are letting the heat in. I shall not harm you, you have a pretty little voice.'

The door was stiff, but was opened suddenly for her from within. The black hand was held out to her, and after a moment's hesitation, she seized it, and was pulled up into the coach.

Inside she found herself sitting on a seat of dark purple velvet beside an even darker figure dressed entirely in black: only his face and hair gleamed above his clothes, an even startling white. His eyes, like his clothes, were black, and were fixed upon her with a kind of dispassionate intensity. She gazed quickly at the floor, which was covered with black fur, and wished that she had not got into the coach. 'Curiosity is a talent of the Devil,' Father Antonio had said, 'no child of God wishes to know what she is not freely taught.'

'You have a pretty voice, Maria.'

She looked up. 'I know it. How do you know my name?'

'How do you know that you have a pretty voice?'

'Everyone in the village says so.'

'If you were properly trained you would have a fine voice. Do you understand that? More than a pretty voice that the village admires, but a voice which all Italy might revere. Do you understand that?'

It was not easy to understand him, as he spoke in a curious manner. A foreigner, Vittorio had said.

'I will send you to Milan. I shall make a singer of you. Where are your parents? Answer me, do not be so foolish as to throw away the opportunity. I shall not drive this way again.'

When, early in the evening, she was driving away from her home, silent, astonished, and hardly able to believe herself alive or awake, she turned suddenly to him and asked his name.

'What do you choose to call me? Choose.'

She sought gravely for a name, and remembered Vittorio in the far away afternoon.

'Are you Midas?'

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She could not tell whether he was angry or amused.

'It will serve,' he said at last; 'it will serve.'

No: it was impossible to tell.

Later that evening she shivered, and he said sharply: 'Cover yourself. From now you must guard your body for me. You must do justice to this arrangement between us.'

When I asked her what had become of her mysterious benefactor, Madame replied that she had not seen or heard of him from that day on, and that she had no idea where he was. 'He may reappear,' she said carelessly. 'Oh, yes, I should recognise him. I could never in my life forget what he looked like.'

And reappear he most certainly did.

I cannot remember how many months it was after she had told me the strange story of her departure from her family and home that Madame announced her intention of leaving Italy. It was an electrifying announcement and, I had good reason to know, quite unpremeditated; and I discovered to my delighted surprise that Paris was to be our destination. I observed at the time that Celin, the

maid, alone seemed unmoved by the sudden change of plan, and suspected that she had foreknowledge of it: but I never ascertained whether this was so. I never understood Celin, and did not like her in consequence.

Madame made this announcement on the last evening but one of a short season in Naples to a small casual crowd who were gathered in the green room at least an hour before the opera was due to begin. She threw open her dressing-room door, simply said, 'I am going to Paris,' and shut the door again. She would not permit anyone to be in her dressing-room except Celin and me, and she gave no reason for her decision through the door. She sent me immediately to inquire about train services, etc., and I had the greatest difficulty in pressing my way through the excited, inquisitive crowd.

Before the evening was finished, the news must have spread all over Naples, even Italy.

I ventured to ask Madame that evening why she had resolved to leave, but she only replied: 'It is a country of children and of animals, Augel.' A little later she added suddenly: 'I have a very strong feeling that I should leave immediately; but no reason for it. I even wish we were leaving tonight!'

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'You are impulsive, Madame,' I exclaimed, half afraid lest she plunge us into the embarrassment and complexities of a broken contract.

'If I had not acted on my impulses, I should not be here,' she answered. 'But do not fear; we shall not leave until tomorrow night,' and she sighed restlessly.

'You wish to leave tomorrow night?' I cried. Such an idea had not occurred to me, and I had not bargained for it.

'Of course, of course! Have I not told you that I have had a presentiment? Arrange it!' Then, charmingly, she said: 'Are you not glad that we are going to Paris?'

I told her that Paris was my home, and that I had long desired to return. She gazed at me curiously.

'If it were *my* home, I should never want to go there. I do not want a home or anything to match it.'

The following afternoon I went about four o'clock to the opera house to collect and pack various papers and music which were kept in a cupboard in her dressing-room. The door was not locked, but all blinds were drawn because of the heat, and, as usual, I groped my way to the main

light beside the dressing-table mirror. Imagine my fear and astonishment when the light revealed the reflection of a man sitting in the chair behind me. He was dressed in black, and his hair was of that staring whiteness which one does not associate with age. I must have cried out, but he remained still, with his gloved hands resting before him on the head of an ebony stick.

‘What are you doing here?’ I cried, and instantly recollected the benefactor, the Midas, as Madame had called him.

‘Waiting. As you see, I am waiting.’

He answered me in French, which he spoke with a curious accent, regarding me steadily with expressionless but brilliantly black eyes.

‘Madame Mielli does not allow visitors in her dressing-room before performances,’ I said: it was imperative that I say something.

But he merely replied: ‘I am glad to hear it,’ his eyes never leaving my face.

‘Continue, Mademoiselle, with your duties. I shall not molest you.’ He pointed with his stick to a small parcel of flowers.

They were a few delicate, exceedingly exotic orchids. I had never before seen anything like them, except when Madame had once or twice

before anonymously received an identical package. Clearly this was their donor.

'But how beautiful!' I exclaimed, anxious to behave in the manner required of me.

'They are rare, as they should be. It would not do, Mademoiselle, to have such a precious flower growing wild. One would sicken at the sight. They should be bred carefully, and preserved inviolably from the ranker herbs.'

I placed the orchids carefully in water, wondering what I should do about the cupboard full of papers. Time was so short that I dared not leave them, although I found the prospect of packing them under the strange and vigilant gaze of the mysterious benefactor little to my liking.

The matter was settled for me, however, by his saying: 'Do what you came here to do, Mademoiselle. As Madame Mielli is not due here for another half-hour, you must presumably have come with some duty to perform.'

It was true that Madame was not arriving at the theatre much before five, but I had no notion of how this man knew. Not daring to ask, I merely replied: 'There are papers which I must arrange and pack. Had you arrived a day later,

Monsieur, you would have missed her. She is leaving Italy tomorrow.'

'I should not have missed her. Commence your packing, Mademoiselle, if it amuses you.'

With which strange remark, he terminated the conversation. Feeling in some way that I had been wrong to mention the departure, I did not dare commit myself further; and for what seemed an interminable age I packed, with the uneasy sensation of his seeing my every movement without so much as turning his head.

A little after five, Madame appeared.

I did not hear her enter the room, but she gave a little cry of astonishment, and I turned involuntarily to see her. She was leaning against the closed door, staring at her benefactor; and in spite of her first words I had the immediate impression that she was afraid.

'Midas! It is Midas: after so long!'

The back of his head with the thick shining hair did not move.

She came further into the room and said: 'You have come to hear me sing?'

'On your last night in Naples,' he said.

'On my last night in Naples,' she answered quickly.

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I rose to my feet to leave them, but Madame made a little quick nervous gesture, and I subsided with the scores again.

He had not risen to greet her, I observed, and now she moved to the stool before the dressing-table, and unpinning her large hat, turned round to him, saying with an attempt at gaiety: 'You have done so much for me, and I have wanted to sing for you—to show you that I—Why have you not come *before*?'

'You were not ready for me before.'

'I was not able even to write and thank you.'

'I did not require that of you. I have required nothing of you until now.'

She leaned a little towards him: I felt her tension, and shifted so that I might see his reflection in the mirror.

'Mademoiselle has been admiring my orchids,' he said, after a pause.

She glanced at them, and back at him: an expression of fear, almost of being trapped, crossed her face, but she said: 'It was you. You have sent them to me. Always, on an occasion, when I have sung a new part—or on—'

'Our anniversary,' he finished smoothly.

Decidedly I did not like him, and wished that I were gone.

She was silent at that. Then she asked suddenly: 'You have not heard me sing since then; all these years?'

'Naturally I have followed your career with the closest interest. When I have chosen to hear you sing, I have heard you. One does not sow so many gold coins, without reaping one's reward. I am not God, Maria.'

Before his faint sardonic smile had disappeared, she said: 'What is it you require of me?'

'I think, at this point, that Mademoiselle had better leave the room. I do not care to make a proposal to you of such an intimate nature in the presence of a third person.'

And at that point I left the room, Madame telling me to return in half an hour.

When, however, I did return, I did not dare enter the room: voices were clearly audible.

'—therefore I warn you, Maria, to be very very careful.'

And Madame's voice crying passionately: 'How can you present me with this frightful predicament? How can you expect to remain secret all these years, and then suddenly appear with this

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fantastic notion? I am leaving tonight, and I shall never return—never return!’

‘To this country of children and animals?’

‘How do you know that? How do you know what you know?’

‘I am only seeking to show you that this is no ill considered decision. I know you as well as if you had been always with me. You shall not be prevented from pursuing your career, except for a short indispensable period—on the contrary.’

But she interrupted him by crying: ‘No! No! No! I do not want that. Most of all I cannot bear that!’

Then I heard a movement in the room, and, fearing discovery, I hastened away.

When Celin arrived, I told her what had happened. She listened impassively and then said: ‘Why did you leave her?’

I told her; and with one look of silent contempt, which I considered impertinent, she hurried to Madame’s dressing-room. I followed, filled with misgivings about what we should find. But he was gone; and Madame was alone. She had locked the door, but she opened it when Celin called to her.

Perfect Love

'Cancel the arrangements, Augel. We are going by an earlier train.'

'Madame, there is no earlier train after the opera.'

'Then a later one. Not the same train. You are to tell no one. You understand? No one. I shall drive straight back to the hotel afterwards, and eat something. Then we shall wait the train's departure. Book seats in your name. Do anything, but tell nobody.'

'And the papers, Madame?'

'Leave them. Go now. Celin will stay with me until I rejoin you. Augel! Did you admit the gentleman who was here?'

'No, Madame. He was already here when I arrived.'

I left to do what I was told. I was very much upset by the events of the afternoon, and resolved to do my utmost to arrange matters smoothly. I managed with considerable success, every detail was accounted for, down to paying our bill at the hotel, and the packing of my own possessions.

At the hour when I expected them, Celin arrived alone. In spite of her customary reserve, almost amounting to hostility, I realised at once that something had happened to disturb her.

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'Madame is not here!' she cried, on entering the room.

'No. Did you not return with her yourself?'

'I was prevented. Some corruption is happening. I fear for her. I did not see very much—but what I have seen—'

'*What* have you seen, Celin?'

'Madame was in a violent haste. She did not change after the performance. I covered her with a cloak, and she seized a bag and fan. She would not allow me to pack anything. We were to leave by the smaller entrance as always, where her carriage usually waited, and she kept saying that we must leave before the crowd could have time to collect. When we reached the door, the crowd was already there—very great, as the news of her departure had spread abroad. We pressed our way to the carriage: I trying to protect her from the people—they were mad, Signorina—she turning round constantly to me to be certain that I followed her. The carriage door opened: I saw a black gloved hand reach out to grasp hers. She called my name once, but before I could reach her, or she had time to resist, she was swung up into the carriage. The door slammed. I seized the handle to wrench it open, but on the window was tapped a black stick with an ivory

skull. The next minute I was swept to the ground, and the carriage was gone; the crowd cheering its dust. What a fool am I! What a fool!

‘But what could you have done?’

‘I should have held on to the door. I should have remained with her.’

‘Nonsense. You would have been killed!’ I exclaimed. The idea seemed to me preposterous.

‘I should have been with her. It is my only wish.’

She seemed so distraught that I gave her some wine, and urged her to eat and calm herself; saying that I was certain, if it was humanly possible, that Madame would not miss the train.

There was little over an hour to wait, which we bore almost in silence. At the end of it, she had not returned, and it was clear that Celin was right.

‘Is there nothing we can do?’ I asked, after an interminable silence.

‘I cannot think of anything, except to wait. Have you a notion, Signorina, which might be followed?’

But I could think of nothing. The situation was utterly beyond me: I felt as though I was living some piece of life out of an opera; something sinister and fantastic—altogether impossible.

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Eventually, I suggested to Celin that we rest. Of course if Madame returned, she would wake us. She refused even to lie down and, useless though it seemed to be, I resolved on staying in the room with her. I stretched myself upon the sofa, and slept.

I awoke, to find it morning, the red lamps still lit, and Celin still on her stool by the door. I noticed that she had torn all my labels off the trunks, and fastened clean white ones in their place.

Madame had not returned, Celin said. She looked positively old with anxiety, and refused to breakfast.

All the morning was passed, and still Madame did not return. I was anxious to notify someone of her disappearance but Celin was so much against the idea that I did not pursue it. In some way, perhaps because of her vigil, Celin had become the stronger in the situation, and she was determined simply to wait. There was a big gilt clock like a mermaid, which struck all the quarters of the hours until I felt I should go mad.

At eleven minutes past three, Madame returned.

She walked into the room shrouded in her

long cloak, despite the heat, which was intense. When Celin removed the hood, her hair was revealed hanging wildly down her back. I cannot adequately describe her appearance. She looked as though everything had been drained from her; as though she were dead, ill, asleep, but still standing motionless in the room, staring at the trunks.

After an intolerable silence, she said: 'We are leaving by carriage at once, but nothing is to be written on the labels.'

We did not dare to suggest dressing her hair. Four minutes later we were driving away from the hotel.

We drove until late in the evening. All the journey she sat turned away from us, staring out of the carriage window. As it grew cooler, Celin handed her the white silk scarf she usually wrapped round her throat, but it drifted to the floor unheeded.

We spent that night in a small village. Madame told me to try bribing the coachman to drive all night; but the horses required changing, and new ones were not readily to be found. Celin slept, at her request, on a mattress in her room. She would not eat, and Celin whispered the following morning that she had not slept.

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We rose at six; and, it being a poor place, it was impossible to prepare her chocolate. She drank a little warm milk and cinnamon, and we set off. It was scarcely light.

When the morning was well advanced, she instructed me to order the coachman to stop at a church. 'Any church: the next that we pass.'

We stopped half an hour later in the main square of a small town at one end of which was situated the church; built of fine yellow stone, and carved with the holy martyrs, and above them many saints and angels. There was morning sun behind the church, but it was still cold, and I began to assemble her cloak.

'How pure the air is; it was impossible to breathe in Naples,' she said, and for the first time since our journey she smiled. I was happy that she seemed better, and was now, perhaps, to unburden her trouble.

We drove slowly up to the main entrance of the church. The doors had been opened, I noticed, as though to receive her.

Celin laid her cloak round her shoulders; and she plucked feverishly at the fastening: she seemed very anxious to go.

'Wait for me,' she said. The coachman

opened the door and let down the step for her to alight.

As her feet touched the ground, there began to issue forth from the church door a procession, or crowd of children. They were all dressed in white, and the girls in white veils: each child carrying a wooden cross wreathed with small red berries. The children filled the doorway and crowded uncertainly down the steps which approached it, as though not very sure where they were to go. Although we were immediately before them, not a child stared at us. Many glanced at our beautiful mistress, but they turned back to their crosses. It was a wonderful sight: the good children in their pure white clothes; behind them priests who bore the heavy gold crucifixes, thickly wreathed with berries, the small red drops like the blood of Our Lord; and from the mysterious dusk of the church itself, the soft continuous booming from the organ of harmonies never resolved.

Madame stood still, holding with one hand to the door of our coach. I could not see her face. I saw the priests motion the children forward, down the steps towards us; and was beginning to wonder whether perhaps our coach stood in their way, when Madame whipped round to us, flung herself

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into the coach, crying, 'Drive, drive, shut the door, drive!'

The coachman looked at me astonished, as though he did not comprehend; but I, seeing her white and shaking, her eyes dark with some dreadful unknown terror, I simply repeated her order, and a second later we were off.

As we moved she said: 'You saw the children?'

'But yes, of course,' I replied, utterly mystified.

'They were only coming down the steps,' she said; as though to reassure us, as though it were we who had been afraid.

'I have never seen a procession of that nature,' she said, a moment later.

'It is usual, Madame,' Celin said quietly.

'Surely it is not usual to carry so small an infant?'

We must both have stared at her, for she repeated impatiently: 'So small a baby. They do not expose so small a child to such lengthy ceremony?'

Celin said: 'I saw no infant, Madame.'

She turned to me. 'Yes, yes, the baby carried by the first priest. A baptism do you think?'

At a loss, I said: 'I do not understand what you mean, Madame.'

She gazed wildly from one to another.

'But *you* saw the infant, Augel. High in the arms of the priest, it was unmistakable.' Thinking to calm her, I said: 'I imagine the baby was hidden from us by the figure of Madame. But surely it could not have been a baptism, or if it was, a very strange one, for where was the mother?'

She had been clasping and unclasping her black velvet bag. Now she threw herself back against the cushions as though she had been struck.

'Why do you say that? What possesses you to say such a thing! Are you too perhaps—' she broke off; and regarded me with sudden suspicion and fear.

'I intended no harm, Madame. Truly I do not comprehend what is the matter,' I stammered.

Suddenly she leaned forward, dropping the black bag on the floor of the coach, and seized our hands.

'You must promise me something, both of you. You must swear it by all that you hold most dear. For my sake then, promise that you will neither of you ask me anything, a single question. You will swear that whatever I do, you will

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remain silent to me, and silent about me until I am dead!

Celin promised with immediate simplicity: and Madame turned to me with such an agony of entreaty, that I had no course but to swear also. I felt then that something dreadful had happened during the long night in Naples, something more dreadful than I could imagine or understand: my fear, which, till then, had been vague, unreal, and unattached to myself, sharpened into a sense of responsibility and danger.

My uneasiness was increased when Madame, still holding our hands, continued: 'Good. But there is a further promise; a much greater one. Will you, can you, promise never to leave me? Celin, if you have any love for me will you promise that?'

And Celin answered at once: 'Not for a week, or a day, or a night in your life, Madame.'

'Can you make such a promise so easily then? Is it so simple to promise so much?'

Celin said: 'For me it is simple.'

'You will not change? You will not perhaps—' a spasm of misery crossed her face. 'You will not wish to marry and—look after others?'

‘It is the truth that I wish to remain with you always, Madame, all your life.’

‘Even if I ask you, if I *beg* you to leave me; do not leave me.’

Celin shook her head. She raised Celin’s hands to her lips, and kissed each hand.

Certain that she would ask me, and deeply disquieted, I turned away from her, and, as I did so, my eye caught sight of the black bag on the floor. It was unclasped, and its black velvet mouth disgorged a mass of gleaming white hair.

Madame turned to me. I felt her eyes following mine to the bag. There was a moment’s silence, then she leaned down, picked up the bag and handed it to Celin.

‘I shall not require that any more,’ she said. And Celin, without a word, shut the bag and put it away.

Madame did not ask the second promise of me; and shortly after we arrived in Paris I left her.

Mielli did not engage another secretary.

Accounts of Mielli’s life in Paris and elsewhere, filled pages of my father’s notebook. Her effect on both her public and the many friends, admirers, and lovers she

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attracted seems to have resembled an exotic chiaroscuro of Rupert Brooke in the Underground train, Manon Lescaut, and Stendhal's *Sanseverina*. That is to say she combined the sheer instinctive power to make people to whom she never spoke glad that she was alive; the dangerous capacity to plunge men into raging torrents of emotion which, without her, they might mercifully or tragically have escaped; and the genius to live continuously at the full stretch of her imaginative intellect, regardless of the consequences. 'Living with her,' remarked one of her lovers many years later, 'was like subsisting on the crest of a magnificent waterfall. One was perpetually on the heights, until suddenly, with a vast torrent, one went down, alone.'

In the ten years that followed her flight from Italy, she touched the imagination of thousands, broke the hearts of many, and fulfilled the innermost craving for a romantic inspiration of those few whom she distinguished with her love. To all appearances, she seemed possessed of the incredible good fortune to excel in an art which, at the time, was widely regarded with passionate admiration; which she herself adored: and which brought in its wake all the joys attendant upon a flourishing genius.

And yet there seemed to be something wrong. She travelled extensively, but her journeys were invariably

effected with a dramatic suddenness which left the cities she abandoned quivering and destitute under the impact of her departure. She was apparently as well able to leave managers virtually ruined, as lovers in the midst of their passion; all prospect of their future happiness destroyed with inexorable ease. It was rumoured that these disappearances coincided with the overwhelming desire of the current lover to marry her, but according to my father, there was something more behind them. There were, observes my father, one or two odd little occurrences . . .

He proceeds to record them.

After considerable difficulty he succeeded not only in finding Baron M., but in eliciting from him a reasonably coherent account of his memories in connection with Mielli. They were brief; but so intense that my father was left with the unusual impression that here was a man of nearly sixty who could at least claim to have lived for five weeks of his life. After five weeks she left him, the Baron explained, and nothing would induce her to see him again, although he followed her all over Europe in order to hear her sing, and to watch her. Three of those weeks were paradise, he said simply. No explanation of them would serve to describe his joy, and their passion. He observed that in spite of days so strenuous that they would have left almost anyone else

prostrate, she did not sleep easily or well. At first, she insisted on sending him away from her early in the morning, saying that she slept better alone, and would call Celin if she required anything. Then, as their love grew, and he was less constantly afraid that it would vanish, he refused to be sent away; to lose the joy of waking beside her.

After several nights spent in this manner, he observed that she was exhausted and nervous, and endeavoured to discover the reason. A child had kept her awake, she answered: it had cried during the night, and kept her from rest. Knowing her violent dislike of children, he immediately complained to the manager of the hotel (she would never take a house of any description). The manager of course denied that there was a child next to, above, or below Madame Mielli's suite (he also knew how she felt about children—as who did not?). That evening Baron M. told his beloved that even if there had been a child in any adjoining room, there would be one no longer as the manager was as much devoted to her as anyone else. But she only replied: 'It was not in an adjoining room. It was outside.'

Before they retired, the Baron walked to the windows, which were covered by heavy plush curtains. There was a small balcony outside, he observed, but so far as he could see, it did not connect with the balconies

of other rooms. The idea of a cat had occurred to him, and he was about to say so to Mielli, when she cried: 'You are not *opening* the windows?' She seemed greatly agitated, and really she must have known that with the foggy night air (it was November), he would do no such thing. He reassured her, and later mentioned the possibility of the noise having been a cat. Impossible, she said; a cat would never have disturbed her in that manner. But he felt, nevertheless, that the thought of the noise being an animal rather than a child reassured her, and he waited that night until he was certain that she slept calmly, before sleeping himself.

He woke very early in the morning with a sense of alarm. She was not asleep. She was sitting up beside him in the dark. He whispered her name, felt her start and shiver and stiffen again as though he had interrupted her. The child was crying again, she answered in reply to his question: she was *certain* that it was a child; did he not hear it? He listened, but there was silence. He drew her down beside him. Her hands and her forehead were icy cold, and she gave a little restless sigh as though she were ending an infinite solitude. When he said that he could hear nothing, he felt again the instant stiffening; but she did not reply, and he folded her in his arms, where she lay quietly, holding his hand in both of hers, until as her fingers softened against his, he knew that she slept.

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For several nights after this she would not see him, for various reasons which seemed good to him at the time. She was, after all, greatly in demand, and he was afraid of boring her by his unceasing attentions. He tried asking the watchful and devoted Celin how Madame had slept, and whether she was well, and if Celin thought she was happy: but he could obtain no very satisfactory answer to any of these questions; which was odd, he reflected, as Celin had been very useful to him at other times, telling him never to send orchids and so on. He never understood Celin, or her relationship to his beloved. At times he thought that she was simply a trusted servant, at times an intimate friend, even, at times, some sort of relation. He never asked Mielli about this; on Celin's advice he never asked *her* questions, and when he asked Celin anything which did not immediately concern his love he learned nothing. Celin, he said, would reply to him, regarding him steadily with blank black eyes, and tell him nothing.

After three days he was desperate. He had neither seen nor spoken to Mielli, and no longer could he manage to remain patient and aloof. That night she was singing Marguerite in *Faust*. He had never much cared for the work, but he was unable to lose a chance at least of hearing her. He never again heard the opera, because, he said, the impression she made on him was so terrible:

from the moment when Marguerite puts her hand on the casket of jewels, she contrived to lay before one the whole opera as an inevitable relentless avalanche of tragedy, which, coinciding with her simple childish joy at the treasure before her, was almost unbearable. She not only enlarged the work itself; she lit up the imaginations of the people hearing it, and consumed them in the fire of her love and her death. One could read libretti, one could read a score: it was not there, he said, and then one could see, by the smallest gesture, by a sudden beautiful immobility, by some phrase sung with apparent exquisite simplicity, the uttermost significance, not of her art, but of the work itself. How was it possible not to adore her, a creature with this inimitable quality?

That night, to his infinite joy, they supped together at her hotel. In spite of, or perhaps because of their short separation, their love seemed to spring into new life. After they had eaten, he tried to tell her the impression she had made on him as Marguerite; and she lay in his arms, enchanting and quiet, at peace, he felt, with him. She needed protection, he thought, and the idea of his always providing it deliriously crossed his mind, but he said nothing.

Eventually she called Celin, and retired to her bedroom. When he joined her she was alone: and he noticed

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at once that the plush curtains were drawn back. It was a raw night; the fog billowed and pressed against the large closed windows. Mielli stood by them in her white ruffled wrapper, which was sharply outlined before the dense brown dark. She seemed not to hear him enter the room, for when he spoke, she whirled round, uttering a little cry, and immediately, before he could finish his exclamation, threw herself into his arms. Holding her, the faint beautiful warmth of her body, the streaming cold of her black hair, the brittle delicacy of her hands—he was, for a moment, overwhelmed. He lifted her up, but as he moved a step towards the curtains in order to draw them, he suddenly knew that most passionately she did not want them drawn. He hesitated, and looked down at her. Her face was turned against his shoulder, and she did not speak. He carried her in silence to the bed, and when he laid her down, she kissed him, as though in gratitude for not betraying her. He felt, he said, the bewildered triumph that men occasionally feel when they have succeeded in divining some requirement of their mistress, without understanding the reason for it. For he did not in the least understand why Mielli had become so obsessed by the windows.

He says that he did not intend sleeping at all: nevertheless he woke exactly as he had done four nights before, with Mielli sitting up in the dark beside him. He

waited, and then said: 'I am awake. What is it frightens you?' He felt her trembling violently in the silence. 'Is it that the child has again woken you? Tell me, that I may secure your peace.'

As she did not answer, he moved to light the lamp, but she turned to him, and he felt many cold tears falling on to his arm. 'Not light,' she whispered, almost as though she did not want to be heard. 'I do not hear the child now. I do not hear it.'

When he had calmed her weeping, he tried to ask her questions, but she immediately became so much less calm that he did not dare insist on her answering. She began to tell him to leave her, but he would not hear of it. The night passed in an uneasy temporary calm of separate uncommunicated fears; until she slept, and he remained awake, searching in the aching dark for some explanation or comfort.

He heard the clocks strike six, seven, and eight, and at this last rose from the bed. Mielli seemed profoundly asleep, and he did not disturb her. It had suddenly occurred to him that he must examine the windows. They now hung an opaque grey in the room, so that he required no artificial light for the examination.

He began, from senseless meticulous exhaustion, at the top of the window nearest the bed. The glass was so encrusted with the sediment of fog that he could see

nothing through it: only the lazy whorls of some half-hearted window-cleaner were dimly visible. He was turning to the second window, when, dropping his eyes, he saw something else. About one metre from the bottom of the glass were innumerable marks: small, oh very small, desperate finger marks and smears.

He dropped to his knees and tried to wipe them away, but he knew all the time, he said, that they had been made from outside the window. The marks remained, and now he could see in one corner the distinct imprint of a tiny hand which had been pressed palm against the pane. Terror possessed him, and for a long time he deferred opening the window for fear of what he knew he would find: an empty balcony, two metres by fifty centimetres, unconnected with any other balcony, any pipe, any creeper—(laughable, in any case, to think that a child so small could have performed such feats); with nothing but a drop of twelve metres to the balcony below. 'I knew,' he said, 'that there was no explanation. I knew that she would not have been so terrified had there been any explanation, however elaborate.

'After what seemed an age-long contemplation of that horrible little balcony, I rubbed away the finger-marks with my handkerchief; shut the window, and turned back to the bed. Mielli had gone. I tried the door leading to the adjoining room. It was locked. I rushed to

the second door, and there Celin met me with my clothes over her arm. She held them out silently, and when I did not take them said: "At once. You are to go." It was useless to argue with Celin. I thought for a moment, and said: "Very well, but on one condition. You must promise that she receives a letter I shall write to her immediately I leave." Celin, her eyes never leaving my face, answered: "I promise."

'Back at my hotel I wrote to her. It was a long letter, and into it I put my whole heart. At two o'clock I sent it round by my servant with instructions that he deliver it only to Mielli herself; or to Celin. At three he returned with the letter. They had gone, he said; he had been so long because he had been trying to find out where they had gone, but nobody at the hotel appeared to know.

'Thereafter began the fruitless heart-rending pursuit, on which I spent so many of the ensuing years. Of course she was not difficult to trace, but I found it useless to lay either my life or my heart at her feet. She did not want them, or she would not have them. She simply lent herself to me for five weeks: she was not really mine at all.'

My father remarks simply here that after five years he collected a dozen other curious incidents; but that on

reviewing them, he found several to be redundant, and decided to omit them. 'As I have always conceived what we call Truth to be a lifelong arrangement of adjoining facts, this decision may be deemed inconsistent: but my excuse for selection is our universal inability to contain more than a minute proportion of facts simultaneously (see *The Incontinence of Memory*, Notebook 27, Chaps. 12-28); and since selection breeds the delectable distortions known as philosophy and art, I let it be known merely that I select, without further apology.'

I select from my father's selections, and have condensed so far as is possible, his long circumstantial accounts. Briefly then. . . .

There was her absolute refusal in London to meet anybody. She drove back and forth from the Opera House accompanied by Celin; and was so reserved that even the English (accustomed to relying vicariously on foreign emotion) were not wholeheartedly appreciative. When very nearly everybody had failed to get her to dine or sing at their evening parties, they ceased, generally speaking, to go to the Opera.

In Vienna, however, almost as though she had gained heart from her solitary life in London, she gave herself up to every gaiety that offered; and Vienna provided her with everything, and adored her. There she sang and was fêted, and all went well, until she formed

an attachment to a young and exceedingly romantic conductor. There were rumours of their possible marriage; then of their secret marriage; then of Mielli being already secretly married; and finally, of her having an illegitimate child to whom Celin was nurse, and who travelled everywhere with her. The precise age of this child differed widely in the reports, but they had a dire effect on the young conductor, who, after several public and many private scenes with her, lost his head, and finally his life.

Apparently he rushed from Mielli's hotel one morning into a mob of reporters outside it, crying that he had been deceived, that there was a child, that she had grievously wronged him, that the stories of her disliking children were false, that he would be haunted for the rest of his life, that Celin was a witch, Mielli out of her mind, and so forth. They seized him, and shook him for news as terriers shake their prey, but could elicit from him no more than frantic denials—he had not seen the child, only she saw it—there was a private room that not even Celin—and shook himself free, running with such wild determination that they lost him.

Two hours later it was reported that he had shot himself in the green room of the Imperial Opera House.

Mielli left the hotel and Vienna the same day, and the manager, on being closely questioned, denied the existence of any child. Madame had reserved a suite, very

spacious indeed, but there was no child, and surely he, the manager, was in a position to know such an elementary fact. A week later people were convinced by the consoling explanation of the unfortunate young conductor's instability and madness.

Mielli appears then, and on many subsequent occasions, to have received repeated offers of engagements in her native Italy, but they were always refused. How much she was affected by the events in Vienna it is hard to judge, but she retired with Celin to some village in the Alps for nearly three months' rest and solitude.

One possibly rather tragic fact emerges from these contrasts of metropolitan triumph, and her recurrent flights or retreats to some obscure corner of Europe. She seemed, with the exception of Celin, to be utterly without close friends of either sex. Where men were concerned the inference is obvious; and of women it was said that she remarked: 'There are only two kinds of women: the domestic variety, who feel that I should be one of them, and the others, who wish that I was not.'

So at intervals she would hide in some little village, seeing nobody, and scarcely speaking for days. If letters ever managed to reach her, she would leave at once. So invariable and immediate was this rule, that small inn-keepers and hoteliers got to hear of it, and the more

cunning of them secreted or destroyed the letters in order to retain her. Eventually some manager's plea, or the sudden urgent need of money drew her forth to sing. There was nothing pathetic about that. She adored singing, and only retired after one of the unhappy mysterious flights: and she spent money with a quiet and concentrated abandon which most people who had anything to do with her found really disconcerting.

She appears to have spent one whole successful winter in Berlin. She discovered there an admirable accompanist, with whom she worked steadily for months on a number of new parts. She sang twice a week, and one of the more affluent and eccentric Crown Princes gave her eight magnificent pianos, which he disposed for her in the eight capitals of Europe she most frequented, and a portrait of himself cut in crystal and surrounded by rubies. It was said that he was madly in love with her, but as almost anything was rumoured of either of them separately this was perhaps the most obvious consequence of their appearing in the same newspapers. At any rate, try as they would, the journalists were unable to whip up any more likely romance. Her season ended, however, with a characteristically unfortunate occurrence.

The occasion was the last night, which was to be a

charity benefit for orphans of Berlin. The idea was put to her with some anxiety by the nervous and well-informed manager, but to his delighted relief she received it with enthusiasm, seemed almost, indeed, to welcome it. At the end of the performance, while she remained, as the audience vociferously indicated she should, alone on the stage, the producer led forward from the auditorium what was presumably the most attractive orphan available, carrying a large bunch of roses. The child was pushed up the steps beside a proscenium pillar, and thence led towards Mielli by the beaming producer. Mielli turned to receive the child and its flowers; there was much applause; the child returned down the steps, and the curtain finally fell. In her dressing-room, however, Mielli sent at once for the producer.

What did he mean by allowing children behind the scenes? she began.

Only one child, the producer replied placatingly; and then ushered by himself from the auditorium, and then only to the stage. It had been a nice thought of the Directors of the Orphanage: a way for the children, through one child, to express their gratitude.

It was not that child she had objected to, Herr Wernhardt: it was the child in the wings; the small child watching.

He knew nothing whatever about a second child. Naturally he would have allowed no such thing. He was horrified. The matter should be at once attended to.

'It did not merely watch. When I received the flowers it laughed. It laughed, and then it went away.'

She seemed hysterical to the point of breaking down.

'I will myself at once inquire into this, and return to you.'

Herr Wernhardt retired. He was an ingenious man. He returned fifteen minutes later, and announced that the child had been found and thoroughly scolded for its impudence.

Mielli flushed deeply and seized his hand.

'If you have found it that is all I wanted. Send it away quickly, but do not harm it. I am tired, and the whole business is over now. Do not concern yourself further, dear Herr Wernhardt. It is I who am unreasonable.' She tried to smile, but her eyes were brilliant with tears, and she trembled violently.

'Naturally I said no more. She had given us a magnificent evening. I left her. Of course,' concluded Herr Wernhardt to my father, 'I had been utterly unable to trace the child.'

Three Miles Up

After brief; and from our point of view, unmomentous engagements in Prague and Budapest, Mielli received an advantageous offer to sing in Madrid for the Summer Season with an international company (mainly composed of Italians). She went.

They arrived, she and Celin, two weeks before the company was due to assemble. It was magnificent sultry weather, the weather Mielli revelled in. As usual, she arrived unknown to anyone, and had not the faintest idea where to stay. Apparently she announced to Celin that they were going to live incognito for the two weeks before them, and would therefore endeavour to find a small unfashionable hotel. Once she had embarked on any way of life which seemed to her in the least dramatic, Mielli threw herself into the plot with gusto. She stopped the first man she thought attractive in the street, and inquired of him for an hotel. Of course he was a stranger, an American, but he considered himself well above the tourist level of traveller, and answered her in fluent idiomatic Spanish. She replied in Italian, and eventually they compromised in French which did neither of them credit. He directed her to a small hotel, where, he said, as though he himself was surprised by the fact, he also happened to be staying. It was very quiet, very cheap, and, he reiterated earnestly, '*très très espagnole*'. Ignorantly delighted at the prospect, Mielli

proceeded, with Celin, and a judicious selection of her awe-inspiring quantity of luggage, whither she was directed, aided by the American, whose name was Edward Cort.

In the carriage she learned that he was a writer spending the legacy of an aunt on broadening his mind. To Mielli, who had travelled entirely for professional reasons for what seemed to her a great many years, this idea was faintly ridiculous but delightful. He travelled around, he said, and learned about people. He sent stories home and some of them had been published: he would show her if she was interested. She was fascinated, but alas, she was unable to read American. Nevertheless, she would be delighted to see them, and he, secure in the knowledge that she would at least be able to decipher his name, was content. He guessed that she was a young girl doing her tour of Europe, he said: and when, entranced at the idea, she asked him why he thought so, he replied that a great many young women from his country spent a year or two in this manner, and that he could tell them a mile off. She agreed enthusiastically with his diagnosis of her; and (they were now at the door of her room in the hotel), on fervent plans for her thorough absorption of Spanish atmosphere, they parted.

Celin was made to preserve the secret of her identity, and Mielli prepared to enjoy herself. Even the dirty

fly-encrusted squalor of the hotel did not damp her spirits, and she nearly sang with joy as she searched among her clothes for something simple and quiet to wear—like a young American girl, only of course Signor Cort knew she was Italian, for she had told him. Celin, delighted at her gaiety, implored her not to sing, pointing out that even young Italian girls did not usually possess her particular quality in this direction; and they both laughed until the tears ran out of their eyes. 'We will eat garlic, and drink execrable wine, and I may even adopt a flower between the teeth. At the end of two weeks, I shall disappear.'

By the end of the first evening, the American had told her his life story: how he had refused to enter his father's business in Detroit; how he had saved and worked to escape and travel, and how the unexpected windfall from his Aunt Cassie had provided him with the means. He had broken his engagement with a College girl because he did not want to settle down, and now, here he was, thoroughly disillusioned about money, love and life; all set to be a great writer. And what about her, he inquired, what were her interests or hobbies? Was she engaged to anyone? Or were marriages arranged for Italian girls as they were in Spain? He could not say how strongly he disapproved of this custom, he was all for equality between men and women, didn't she agree?

Mielli replied with simple dignity that nobody had arranged a marriage for her, that in any case she abhorred the matrimonial state, and had no intention of entering upon it. Somewhat taken aback by this he persisted in attempting to discover her 'purpose in life'. She said she liked music and dancing, but had not yet succeeded in establishing a place for herself in either art, but there was, she said demurely, plenty of time.

'Of course,' agreed Edward (they had arrived at Christian names), 'and you, let me see, you cannot possibly be more than nineteen. Don't ask me how I know,' he cried, as her look of delighted surprise registered with him. 'Writers are supposed to know these things.'

'You should come to America,' he enjoined earnestly a few days later. 'You could get a really first-class training for anything there, and with your intelligence you'd pass out top of any class for examinations.'

By arrangement, he spent the morning showing her Madrid, which he seemed to know very well indeed, and the evening in discussing their future (my father remarks that their future is a favourite topic with all Americans under thirty, after which it is the futures of their children). The long hot afternoons were passed separately, and it is then that Mielli herself recorded these events in a diary begun in Madrid, and brought to a sudden end long before she left that city.

After a week, Edward Cort proposed marriage to her. Two days later he proposed again, this time with the added inducement that he abandon writing and return to his father's business, thus ensuring them financial security. At first, Mielli seems to have taken his proposal almost as a joke. When, however, he suggested abandoning what he had earlier declared to her to be his life's aim and ambition, she was horrified. He was in deadly earnest. Emotion had struck him at the age of twenty-four, like lightning, and he was desperate. He besieged her with flowers, with poems in Spanish and/or English, and with himself. The protective skin of his adolescent 'disillusionment' was torn from him, and he stood before her naked and imploring.

She made the signal error of taking him as a lover. She did this out of pure generosity and remorse, bad reasons at the best of times, but on this occasion more than usually unwise. When the two weeks were up, she fled, but not before he had found out enough about her to make him search for much more. Penitent, and a little breathless, she found herself back in a large cosmopolitan hotel, with rehearsals of *Tosca* before her. Her diary ends with the brief remark: 'I cannot do these things, nor do I feel this is the end of my reckoning.'

Edward Cort, who was not without initiative, discovered his mistress's identity, and set about getting

himself a job connected with the Company. He succeeded remarkably well, obtaining the somewhat ambiguous position of the Company's assistant press representative. At this point he was still possessed of the last illusion: the illusion that if one loves another person with sincerity and passion, and can convince them of the fact, they must reciprocate.

To do him justice, even credit, he did not, when applying for the position, or subsequently, ever disclose his relationship with Mielli, or even that he knew her. He wrote her an heroic and rather touching note when he was engaged by the manager of the Company to the effect that she could count on him not to do anything so low down. From her new hotel she sent for him, and while he made further alternative proposals to her, she thanked him for his discretion, begged his forgiveness, and repeated many times that all must finally be over between them. If he could not quickly recover, she said, he must go away. I think he realised that she had attempted neither to bribe nor blackmail him out of his job. He left her, nurturing the entirely new idea of a life-long hopeless Passion. But we must, for the purpose of this story, be grateful to him. Edward Cort kept a journal. It was written almost entirely about himself; entirely for posterity; but it contained, after the picture postcard descriptions of how Madrid and its art struck

him, certain incidents about Mielli; not only in the city where he met her, but in other places beside; for he continued with the Company after its Spanish season.

The season opened with *La Tosca*, which was a furore. Mielli, however, in spite of the ecstatic reception, said that she disliked the part. Particularly did she claim to dislike the second act with Scarpia, and indeed, great persuasion and tact were employed to get her to do the famous Sardou business with the candles and crucifix after the murder.

It was reported that she came off the stage for the second interval exceedingly overwrought, and had to be led to her dressing-room by a young creature called Miguel Maria Coraldez.

From him we have a very curious story. He was a call boy and general dogsbody, and, at the time, not more than sixteen, overworked, gentle, observant, and afraid of everyone. Particularly was he afraid of calling temperamental stars out of their dressing-rooms. Nevertheless, Mielli once smiled at him, and he was so overwhelmed, that from the moment of her smile he devoted himself to her comfort and well-being. It was one of his duties to lock the dressing-rooms each night after the performance, and another to unlock them in the morning for the dressers and cleaners to do their work. Into Mielli's dressing-room he would always put one or two

flowers, in spite of the quantities already in the little room; and he would dust the chair in which she sat when painting her face, and do anything else that he felt inclined or had time to do. Sometimes in this room, he would find something rather strange, something he did not find in any other dressing-room, although in some others it might have been less unexpected. Her grease sticks, instead of being arranged in a neat regiment on a clean white cloth, would lie irregularly all over the table; and on the mirror above the table would be a very bad, a crudely sprawling drawing, drawn with the grease sticks all over the mirror.

The first time that Coraldez found this, he wiped it carefully out, which took him a long time. He thought that some child must have broken in and played this trick. He did not mention it to anyone for fear he should be blamed as the person who had not properly secured the dressing-room door, which after that he was most careful to do thoroughly. When, however, a few mornings later, he discovered it a second time, he did not dare remove it. He took to examining the mirror at night before locking up, and invariably found both it and the grease sticks in order. He was therefore horrified and not a little frightened, when, a week or so later, he discovered yet another drawing. Still he did not dare mention it to anyone, least of all to Mielli herself; as he observed

that she seemed to be undergoing great strain. He knew that she hated singing *Tosca*. He was frightened to death of Celin, and they had no word of any language in common. After a week or so, Mielli told him abruptly that she wished Celin, and Celin only, to possess the key to her door, and almost gratefully he gave it up. He never found any drawings in the other dressing-rooms, and he placed his bunch of flowers at the foot of her door every morning.

Although the Company was presenting six full-length works of international reputation, *Tosca*, for some reason, remained the most popular with the audiences of Madrid. Therefore, notwithstanding several attempts by Mielli to withdraw from the part, the management, for many good reasons, refused. They pointed out to her that their Scarpia had been procured with great difficulty at enormous expense, that it was his most famous part, and that they had no one who came anywhere near Mielli for singing *Tosca* herself. So the weeks went by, and Mielli, for once, did not break her contract.

We have here a somewhat lengthy extract from a letter written by the manager of the Company to his wife in Paris. (His wife, then a widow, sold the letter to my father for an exorbitant price: her husband had left her very little money, and she was, at that time, living ruthlessly on his memory.)

. . . How glad am I, my dear Solange, that you quitted the theatre in favour of making me the happiest of men! There has been more trouble with Mme M. I am at a loss to understand the temperament of these Italians. At times so reasonable! So serious in their work! So gentle though spirited in their nature! At other times My God! On Thursday night we again gave *Tosca* before (among a brilliant audience), the Queen Mother. Falazzio was in fine voice, and he and Mme M. were ravishing in their famous act. All was going admirably, until, when he was stabbed, Falazzio miscalculated the position of the chaise-longue, and fell, striking his head severely on one of the bronze lion's heads which adorns its feet. Naturally the blood gushed forth, and when Mme M. returned with her candles she saw it. She stood transfixed, intoning half to herself; but in a manner unmistakably clear to the audience 'Is he dead? He is not dead?' The candles dropped from her hands and she fell on her knees beside Falazzio, as though, in reality, she thought him dead. Before Falazzio could make any movement to enlighten her, she had called in ringing accents 'The curtain! The curtain! Oh Mother of God, what have I done!' Here your little husband took command;

the curtain was rung down, and the stage director and myself; by then half convinced of a tragedy, rushed on to the stage. Falazzio was all right: only a deep cut at the side of his head; but when we informed Mme M. of this, she merely stared at us in the wildest manner, and crying 'How is it possible to know whether a person is dead or alive?' fainted away. The confusion was unutterable. With the greatest difficulty I contrived the finish of the opera. Mme M. was incapable of continuing. Falazzio was furious. There was trouble with the conductor, and the house was in an uproar: the Spanish are no joke, my dear, deprived at the *moment critique* of their drama. The Royal Family retired, so full of dignity and condolence that I fear the worst. After half an hour I succeeded in assembling the little Donata for Tosca, and the work was completed.

Later that evening I visited Mme M. at her hotel as she earnestly requested me to do. Do not be alarmed, the visit had no element of the erotic, and I relate it merely for your amusement.

I found Mme reclining on her sofa, alone and reading, or pretending to read, a book. She looked pale and exhausted, but seemed quite calm, and offered me cognac, refusing any herself. I must

confess that she is an exceedingly beautiful creature, though not one I should choose.

'M. Lussinge,' she said. 'I am sorry for what happened tonight. The situation was an alarming one, but for me more so, because it brought back memories of something I try to forget.'

I murmured something sympathetic and non-committal. You know with these artists one must do that, and always they like to dramatise their own lives to the level of the characters they play. In ten years I have learned to humour them. It was as graceful an apology from an exhausted woman as one was ever likely to get.

Mme M. continued: 'I should, however, very much prefer to withdraw from the part. I am most unhappy in it, and as the season is nearly finished, would it not now be possible for you to withdraw the opera altogether?'

I produced the familiar arguments: mainly financial, but simplified to suit her understanding of such matters.

She interrupted me by saying, most casually: 'If it is a question of Falazzio's salary, I myself will pay it.'

'Impossible!' I told her, horrified at the idea of having further to discuss the intricacies of the

situation with one so little qualified to understand them.

But she persisted, and after much argument, I was forced to submit to decreasing the number of performances of *Tosca* by exactly half. This means that there will now be only four further performances. It also means, as far as my fevered mental calculations would allow, a loss of about 300,000 francs. No small sum; but sopranos like Mme M. do not grow on trees: one knows her past record, and I am determined to engage her for Paris this winter, principally for her *Manon*, which is superb.

She seemed grateful for the compromise, and was in the act of pouring me more of the brandy, which stood on the little table between us, when the most extraordinary and unpleasant noise crashed upon our peaceful silence. The sound was of playing, or rather uneven banging upon the keyboard of a piano above us; loud, jangling, and utterly meaningless. We looked at each other; then I saw that the shock had made her spill the cognac, and hastened to relieve her of my glass. She murmured something, and was about to rise when I arrested her saying: 'But of course, Madame, I will stop this fiendish noise in an instant. At this hour

of night, somebody is drunk, you may be certain!’

‘No, M. Lussinge, I beg you, do not go. It is not somebody drunk. It is my piano above us, and nobody can get into the room, the door is locked.’

She seemed instantly to regret saying this, turning paler than ever as I immediately replied: ‘But, Madame, somebody, a most unwelcome intruder has got in, and surely you cannot sleep with this. Besides, who knows what other harm they may do?’

I observed that she shuddered at this, but she replied with great firmness: ‘It must be a cat, Lussinge. I will deal with it myself. Perhaps you will be good enough now to excuse me?’

I took my leave, still with the stopping and starting of the lunatic noise sounding as I left. I was worn out in any case, and did not care to invite for myself more trouble. She accompanied me to the door of her suite, and hurriedly bade me goodnight. It was plain enough that she wanted to get rid of me, having gained her point. These artists! These Italians, my dear! And one talks of spoiled children!!! I send a kiss to our dear little babies, and quite envy you the simple anxieties of a mother compared to my monstrous difficulties with the adults of the species. Etc.

Three Miles Up

Mielli did not go to Paris that winter. Instead, after a brief respite, apparently spent on the Riviera in complete solitude and rest, which according to Edward Cort she badly needed (he describes her at the end of the Madrid season as on the point of a nervous breakdown), she, with some others of the Madrid company, travelled in considerable state to St Petersburg. Cort records one small incident about the journey. He says that Mielli usually dined early and alone in her private compartment, but that, owing to the self-constituted exigencies of his job, he ate very much later. On the second night in the train he was making his way down the corridor to the dining-car when as he came to Mielli's door he stopped, because he heard her voice. She was singing, very quietly, an Italian lullaby, a folk song that she must have remembered from childhood. The simple melody entranced him, and he remained for several minutes, concluding that it must be some sort of ballad, with many verses: he was unable to hear the words but, after a brief silence, the tune was repeated again and then again. Hunger, however, and the fear of his being too late for any dinner drove him on before the song was ended.

He dined at length: he had taken with him a Russian phrase book which he was endeavouring to master in order that he might not be utterly lost, so far as the language was concerned, on his arrival. Eventually

he was interrupted from a maze of declensions and aspects by the attendants, who asked him politely if he would continue his studies elsewhere.

On his way back to the sleeper which he shared with several other administrative members of the Company, he was startled to hear that Mielli was still singing: and moreover, he quickly realised, singing the same song. He listened: the tune was unmistakable. Could she be singing herself to sleep? He wondered. He knew that she suffered from insomnia. Acting on a sudden urgent spasm of what he admits in his Journal to be 'my darned curiosity', he knocked on the door and then opened it. The singing stopped abruptly, and she stared up at him from her low seat by the window. Immediately he felt dreadfully ashamed of his intrusion: she appeared so desolate and so proud. She asked him what he was doing, and he improvised awkwardly that he had thought perhaps she was stuck with people, or someone she wished to be rid of; and would like help. She made no comment on this lame, inadequate excuse, but asked him to go and not to repeat the intrusion: adding rather strangely: 'Or I might have to sing to keep you away too.'

He looked at her white face and the nervous darkness of her eyes: she had tried to smile when she spoke to him, but the smile had died at her mouth,

leaving her face haunted and uncertain. There was a moment's silence in which he felt the rack of extreme pity for her. He moved, picked up her hand, and kissed it: 'I am very very sorry to have disturbed you.' He left her staring at her hand.

Events in St Petersburg might never have reached my father's notebooks, had it not been for Madeleine Grierson. Thanks to her there is a remarkably full, though possibly prejudiced, account of them. My father stumbled upon her as a result of one of his ingenious and arresting advertisements in the London evening papers. She came several times to see him, and he made admirable use of her visits. She was, he said, one of those convincingly intelligent, convincingly plain women for whom society is determined to find no place. Her tragedy was that she appeared in no way remarkable, and knew it, although in each single aspect she was well above the average of her kind. She announced briefly that although she had never known Mielli personally, she knew a very great deal about her: adding simply that Mielli had ruined her life.

Miss Grierson came from Glasgow: her family were in ship-building and reasonably well off. Scotland and the Scots early bored her, and she developed a craving for travel—travel of almost any kind. She managed to get

herself sent to Switzerland under the pretext of learning cooking and the like, and from there she barely looked back on Glasgow. She obtained a degree in Natural Science, acquired two additional languages, and set forth. After a somewhat peripatetic existence of five years or so, she contrived to get herself sent by a University in France to St Petersburg for the purpose of translating certain reference books for students of entomology.

Shortly after her arrival, and long before her Russian was conversational, she met Grigorieff; and fell passionately in love with him. He immediately accepted her infatuation as the most natural thing in the world and brushed off several hopeful but less determined women than Miss Grierson. After a very short while they were living together. He seems to have been a remarkable man. He was at least fifteen years older than she was, and enormously tall, with a large nose, hairy hands, and strikingly gentle eyes. He had been married but had left his wife 'in the country a long time ago'. He spent most of his time in some College that was attempting to crossbreed horses, asses, and dogs with a view to producing a new animal ideally suited for purposes of Russian transport. He was not paid very much for this work, but explained that it had the support of all Russia, and put his whole heart into it. The rest of his time, when he was not talking, drinking, or sleeping, he spent

in volcanic bursts of enthusiasm on sculpture. Miss Grierson asserted that this was his genius, but that he never could be induced to take it seriously. Most of his work was unfinished; all of it was exceedingly large; and it became increasingly difficult to move in their flat round the vast quantities of clay and stone which accumulated. She told my father many stories of their life: but with the remark that she seems to have been utterly devoted to an impossible though endearing man, we must forgo them as not relevant. Miss Grierson became so involved with Grigorieff, however, that when her own work was finished, she remained with him.

When the Opera Company arrived, he insisted on taking her to hear it. He had the belief that everyone who was not Russian was identical, and he felt that the Italian company would remind her of Glasgow.

From the moment that he saw Mielli, he was bewitched. The work was *La Traviata*, and when, after heart-rending suspense, Violetta eventually died in the arms of her lover and the curtain fell, he sat like one of his own statues with tears pouring down his cheeks, murmuring ecstatic imprecations and endearments. Then he leaped to his feet and rushed out of the theatre. He had forgotten her, Miss Grierson said; and, failing to find him in the crowds, she went home.

He did not return that night. Two days later, when she came back to the flat in the early afternoon, she found him working. He was cutting, from a small block of beautiful marble, a head. He worked with great care, whistling softly between his teeth; and appeared not to notice her when she came into the room. She had never seen him work in marble before. She watched for a while and then, while she was mending the fire, he said, 'Will you go out of the room now please?' So she went. She was bewildered and afraid, but at that point she refused to see what was happening to him.

At eight o'clock he came into the kitchen and taking her head in his two hands, kissed her on the forehead and said: 'Madka, I am going out. Something has happened; something very beautiful. I do not know how it will end, but when it does, I think it will be very terrible. At the moment I cannot discuss it with you: I am so mad with joy that I cannot talk about it. I beg you not to touch my marble. It is covered with a blue cloth.'

She did not touch the marble. She sat where he had left her, torn with despairing jealousy for hours. She sat, trying to rearrange the features in her face: unable to imagine them more attractive, she felt there was no one in the world so hopelessly, unalterably plain as she. She felt the warmth and love and beauty of her heart expanding

uselessly in her dull body until she was intoxicated with pain. She knew then that if by some freak of opportunity women like her discovered themselves in love, they paid for it in this manner. She was no better than anyone else, she was simply less attractive. She was so desperately unhappy that she was unable to resist suffering more. She put on a coat, veiled herself; and went to the Marinsky Theatre. She waited in the shadow of a small street lamp, fifty yards from the Artists' Entrance, in the freezing snow-encrusted dark. She was accosted twice during those hours, and knowledge that neither man could see her in her veil and in the shadow brought an added humiliation which was almost exquisite.

She heard the distant thunder of applause, and the more immediate confusion of the audience's departure from the front of the theatre in the main street. A little later, Grigorieff marched down her alley, passing her scarcely three yards away, his head down, and his nose jutting from the old fur collar of his coat. He walked straight into the Artists' Entrance, ignoring the small crowd who materialised, it seemed, from nowhere. A carriage crawled down the alley: she had to press herself against the wall to allow its passing. After another interminable wait, Grigorieff reappeared, with the beautiful creature so wrapped in furs that only her small face, silvered with the reflection of light and snow, was visible

for a second as he, to protect her from the crowds, lifted her lightly into the carriage. A brief hesitation, the crack of a frosty whip, and they drove down the alley away from her. The crowd watched the carriage vanish, and remained to see what more there was to be seen: but she, confirmed in her misery, walked stiffly home.

During the ensuing weeks she tried endlessly to understand and destroy her love for Grigorieff, attempting to find in it something ignoble and absurd: the commonplace dependence of a dull and no longer young woman upon an irresistible and irresponsible child. She discovered that the Company was due to stay in St Petersburg only two months, and tried to comfort herself with the thought that then, forsaken, he would turn to her. But she was living now with the dreadful truth of their relationship: that she had always loved him with all her heart, and that he had generously understood this, and made it possible.

Grigorieff seemed to be living in a gorgeous frenzied dream. He never slept in the flat now, nor did he eat there. He came back only to work on his small piece of marble in the afternoons. He had ceased to go to the College, to answer letters, or to see friends. She took to bringing him tea and preserved cherries (of which he was inordinately fond) at about five; feeling that as he came back she must see him with a natural reason for doing

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so. She replenished his fire, drew his curtains, and trimmed the two large lamps. He always thanked her, and treated her in a gentle abstracted manner, as though, she felt in her more bitter moments, she was a faithful, sensitive dog. Sometimes she stayed in the room a little while, forcing herself to speak of small everyday things, in the desperate hope that he would reward her patience and restraint by telling her what was happening and going to happen to him. But for a long time he did not tell her anything at all.

Then, one afternoon, he came into the kitchen long before five o'clock and said: 'I have finished it. Will you please come and see?'

He had swept everything off the table so that the head stood alone at one end of it, on a small block of dark wood. It was utterly unlike anything she had ever seen him do; very small and fine and delicate, the medium perfectly expressing his subject: a young sensitive girl of extreme beauty, arrogant, but with a little nervous smile on her lips. The whole work cried out for admiration of its lovely polished ease.

He watched her look at it and said: 'For some it may be sad to know when they have done their best work. I know and I am happy. I shall never do anything again like this. I sold my microscope for the marble.

There is not another piece to touch it in St Petersburg, and I have not spoiled it.'

Still staring at the head, she asked: 'What are you going to do with it?'

'It is going away. I am taking it to her tonight. She does not know. Now that I have finished it, I can talk to you.'

He told her then what she had long known: that he adored Mielli, that she returned his love, and that neither of them had ever experienced anything like it. 'It is serious,' he said; 'whatever happens it is as serious for her as it is for me.'

She asked him what he was going to do when the Company left St Petersburg. He said that he did not know, that either she would stay, or he would go.

'But there is little more than a week left! Surely you must have made some plan!'

But they did not seem to have made any plan. He said candidly that he had been afraid to do so.

'And you, my dear Madka, you are so good, and so unhappy,' he exclaimed, gazing at her. 'What can I say to you that will not increase your unhappiness? All these weeks when I have been protected by my love and my work, you have had nothing to comfort you.'

She knew then that he had come back to work in

the flat for her sake. He had done something for her sake.

'You have made this most beautiful thing,' she said. 'Won't you continue when you are with her?'

He said as though he had not heard her: 'She is a great, a very great and wonderful artist, but there is some tragedy, some doom hanging over her, and I shall need all my strength to save her. Do you know, Madka, that first evening was so simple, she received me so naturally that I should never have thought her a tragic creature at all? The next day I could hardly believe that I had had the courage to storm straight into her presence as though I had known her all my life. Two days later, when I was driving back to her hotel with her (we had been quite silent after greeting one another), she suddenly turned to me and said: "We are in love." Later, she said: "And there is nothing in the whole world like it. I did not know that before." When I said to her: "You must know it. I have heard you, and you do know," she replied: "That is my imagination of love. This is my reality." '

He continued, half to himself: 'She does not sleep unless I am with her. Then she sleeps like a child. When I told her that, she was terrified. She has a horror of children. She seems to me very much afraid, and more afraid to tell me why.'

‘How can you talk to each other? Surely she does not speak Russian?’

He rose to his feet. ‘We use French,’ he said briefly. Then, looking down on her, he said: ‘Madka, I have told you all this because I am overflowing with it, and because perhaps you love me and understand my heart. Also, because if things go badly I shall be even more unhappy than you are now. It is like Paradise, and I shall die if it is lost. Shall I come back tomorrow and see you?’

‘It is your home,’ she said stiffly. She did not want to cry.

He dragged on his coat: she saw his face hardening to meet the streets, and said: ‘Your—you are forgetting it!’

He looked at her, lifted the head from its block, and, wrapping it in the blue cloth, crammed the block into his pocket. Then he went, and the unspoken endearment drifted back to her on the draught of the closing door. She had never felt so near to him, or so frightened.

He did not return for three days. Then, on the fourth morning, she was wakened by a loud continuous ringing at the bell. He stood outside. He was without his coat, and she knew, by his appearance, that he had been walking the streets all night. He followed her into his

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room without a word, stumbled against one of his vast unfinished pieces of stone, and with a single terrible wordless cry threw himself on his bed. She took off his jacket and boots, covered him with a rug, and went to prepare a hot drink. In the pocket of his jacket she discovered remnants of the blue cloth, slashed awkwardly to ribbons by scissors. She burnt them.

For days he lay on his bed staring at the ceiling without speaking a word. She brought him food, and he ate if she urged him to eat, but he refused to take off his clothes.

Two mornings after his return a letter arrived for him, and she knew, by the stamp of the hotel on the envelope, that it was from Mielli. She brought it in to him, mentioning the hotel stamp to warn him. She had no idea how he would receive such a letter, but did not dare withhold it. She laid it on the bed, but, speaking for the first time since his return he said: 'Burn it. Burn it in the stove here.'

She said: 'Are you sure you want me to do that?'

He turned his head to the wall. 'Yes, yes, yes. Now.'

After the letter was burned, she noticed that tears were silently pouring down his face. She longed to be able to comfort and release him, but was afraid in his present state even to try. She sat by the stove all that

evening in case he should want to talk to her, hating Mielli with a bitterness and intensity she had not felt all the weeks before when she had been alone.

On the day that the Company were due to leave St Petersburg, she bought a paper. Yes, they had gone, and Mielli with them, amid much eulogistic publicity. It was hoped that they would return the following year.

A letter arrived from the College, which she opened. It stated that in view of his failure to carry out his duties Grigorieff must accept notice. She did not show this to him, but that evening she succeeded in getting him to tell her something of what had happened.

He had given Mielli the little marble head, and they had spent the following morning choosing a pedestal on which to place it. In the afternoon he suggested that they seriously discuss their future, but she replied that this was not possible as she had many engagements up until the evening performance. When he objected, she said that she had not known he would be free. He realised the truth of this, but was nevertheless hurt and resentful, and felt her manner to be strained. He went away and talked to people on the bridge until he felt better. Then he wanted to buy her roses, but had no money. All the time, he said, he was trying to think what he ought to do: persuade her to stay in St Petersburg with him, or go with her wherever her profession led. He had no money

except what he earned, he was nearly fifty, and he had never left Russia. Perhaps she thought him ridiculous, and was either laughing at him, or merely trying to be kind. The whole situation, to an outsider, must have seemed preposterous. Suddenly, swept by a paroxysm of jealousy and fear, he found himself almost running to her hotel. They said she was certainly in, was entertaining in her suite, and that he was late. He ran up the stairs and then paused at the door of her drawing-room. He heard voices: clearly there were several people. She had given him a key to her bedroom, and he decided to wait there until the people had gone away.

He slipped the key noiselessly in the lock, and went in, shutting the door carefully behind him. So far he had managed very quietly, but the state of the room gave him such a shock, that he nearly betrayed himself by an involuntary exclamation.

The room, which was dimly lit, was in a condition of extreme disorder; something well past casual untidiness, he quickly realised. The wardrobe door stood open; the clothes had been ripped from their hangers, and lay in chaotic heaps on the carpet. The dressing-table was covered with powder, which had also been showered over every conceivable object near it. A bottle of scent had been smashed: and the perfume reeked and dripped into the half open drawers. A string of pearls had been

broken: the pearls gritted under his feet wherever he walked. Pairs and pairs of stockings had been clumsily knotted together and tied to the legs of chairs. Books, kept in a shelf above the bed, had been pulled down and odd pages torn from them lay all over the room. The bed was trampled and covered with fragments of newspaper. He picked up one of the dresses and found that the lace had been split and pulled from the neck and sleeves. A vase which had contained flowers had been overturned. He discovered the petals in a hat by the fire, with some diamond earrings and a few melting chocolate drops. Her furs were piled in one corner of the room, and were, he found, saturated with water. For a moment he thought that it was all the work of thieves, but very little further examination ruled this out as impossible. Many objects of great value were plainly visible. It was more like the work of an hysterical lunatic, or some mad, malicious demon.

He lit a second lamp and set it down on a table between the bed and the window in order to see that part of the room more clearly. It was only then that he saw the pedestal they had bought that morning, lying propped against the arm of a chair. And on the floor behind the curtains he found his marble, horribly disfigured, not simply by its fall, he realised with anguish,

but by some deliberate dreadful maltreatment it must have received.

He searched with useless panic for the pieces which had been chipped from the nose and chin, but failed to find them. Then, hearing faint sounds of departure from the adjoining room, and footsteps, he concealed himself behind the drawn curtains. The door of the bedroom opened, he heard the rustling of a dress, and knew it was Mielli. She stood perfectly still in the room for a moment, and then, without even an exclamation, left. When the door had shut, he emerged with his mutilated work in his arms. He observed that on the chair against which the pedestal had rested lay the remains of the blue cloth in which he had wrapped his present. Embedded in it was a huge pair of scissors. He collected every scrap of the cloth, put the marble under his coat, and entered the drawing-room.

She was lying on a sofa before the fire, and her position, in view of what she had just seen, struck him as extraordinary. He asked her whether she had been in her bedroom. She answered that she had; and then, as though something about his appearance alarmed her, she rose suddenly, saying, Why had he come here now; had they not arranged for him to meet her at the theatre? He did not reply to this, but silently held out the disfigured

head. She gave a little cry of horror and seized it from him.

He said: 'You have been in your bedroom, you have seen it; why did you not call the manager of the hotel, or your maid? Why did you do nothing at all, but come back here and lie on the sofa?'

She was gazing distractedly at the poor piece of marble, murmuring something over and over again in Italian, which he did not understand. When he repeated his question she looked at him and said: 'I cannot tell you that. I cannot tell you anything except that I am so very, very sorry.' He began to insist, but she only said: 'You should never have gone into that room; you should never have seen it.'

But if they were to share their lives, he cried, he must know who had wrecked the room, and why. Surely she understood. . . .

'We cannot share our lives. I thought it was possible, but after this—your work that you gave me—I know that it is not. My life is already shared—cut up and divided whether I will or no.'

The jealousy and fear which had earlier possessed him returned with such violence that for a minute he could not see her, and he shouted blindly: 'These then, are your afternoons! Your engagements, your duties!' He

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could not remember all he said. She stared at him; answered in a few broken unintelligible words; and it was only then he realised that he had spoken in Russian, she in Italian, and they had not understood each other. He moved to her, to take the marble, and she shrank from him as she relinquished it.

Then she said, halting in French: 'I cannot explain to you anything. Nothing that I said would alter the circumstances. They have long been out of my control. You must go, before anything more frightful should occur.'

'I do not understand anything you say. I do not understand anything more frightful than my ruined work and leaving you. If you love me, why cannot you tell me what is the matter, and why this happened?'

She only repeated: 'I cannot tell you,' and her face was closed and expressionless. There was a long silence which she broke suddenly: 'I cannot bear it. You must go at once. I must not see you again. Do you not see what torture you make for us both by standing silent? There is nothing for you to ask, and nothing for me to reply. We are lost'

He walked across the room to the door, almost without knowing what he did. He felt tired and old and as though he had dreamed of a younger man's love. He turned back to see her for the last time. She seemed at

once dear, terribly familiar, and a creature strange and irrevocably separate. From his freezing aching heart he said: 'You should not have deceived me. You should have told me that there was someone else; that you were not alone.'

She stood, silent, and utterly still, and let him go. His last words to her were: 'It doesn't matter.'

He shut the door gently and walked down the stairs, out of the hotel, and away from her into the streets. He realised that he had left his overcoat with her, and imagined himself returning for it. Was she weeping now, or was she utterly unmoved? Any thought of her seemed fantastically unreal, as though she were more the work of his imagination than the shivered marble he carried. Even the simple expression of her thoughts had lain far beyond him in the realms of another language. He had never known her; there did not exist a creature outside his dying love. He walked all that night, trying to destroy his image of her. In the early morning he put the marble into the river. It drowned face towards him, the waters closing over it with a kind of greedy unseemly haste. His desolation was complete.

And that, according to Miss Grierson, was the end of it all. She was unable to learn any more from Grigorieff. His description of Mielli's chaotic room did not seem to arouse in him any curiosity: did not appear to

strike him as insolubly strange, as it certainly did Miss Grierson. He exhausted himself with that one heart-rending stream of narration, and then never referred to it again.

He never referred to it, but he never recovered from it. As he began painfully to pick up the bare outlines of his life, her last hopes resolved themselves into the certainty of despair. All their previous life together seemed to have vanished: they had nothing but their mutual separate unhappiness of the past weeks, about which neither dared to speak; and her desperate private longing for some future, which always receded as the silent, miserable inconclusion of each day joined with another before it.

She left him at last. She said that she wanted to go home. It was not true, and he knew it, but impassively he let her go. He did not really care. He had lost the power even to feel responsible for her, and for that she was grateful. She returned to England, and took the first job (in an Insurance Office), which offered. He wrote to her once after she left, but she would not show my father the letter. She simply said that Grigorieff had returned to his wife and children in the country, and that they no longer communicated.

She tried not to think about him, Miss Grierson concluded.

Mielli's feelings, at this time, were not recorded.

We come next to a letter, written by an Englishman whose name appears to be Gerald, to (by implication), a similar gentleman whose name is evidently Oliver.

There are no other names, and my father has made no comment before or after the letter.

Paris

My dear Oliver:

In spite of many pressing engagements, I cannot resist taking the time to tell you of Charles's latest fiasco. It was quite useless, of course; he wouldn't listen. I saw this coming weeks ago, as I think I told you; and followed your advice. I tried him with those ravishing Japanese dancers. I even suggested those charming ideas of yours of an Armada on the Seine, or a pyramid out at Auteuil for the eventual disposition of his desiccated bones; or a *real* party (I thought the Rape of the Sabine Women, or simply the Last Judgment, both admirable ideas; simple but effective, possibly even amusing). But dear Charles, as we know, is nothing if not obvious to the point of rank vulgarity. At

quite four times the cost and half the effect, he determined to put on an opera; something which happens here incessantly to the detriment of conversation or any other evening amusement, and which has really become such an obvious way of spending time that nobody of any consequence would so indulge themselves had they any alternative. Nevertheless, Charles must put on an opera.

But worse. . . . Not content merely with any work suggested to him by the few people prepared to condone his awful choice, he must pick Verdi's *Macbeth*—a gawky antiquated piece, that has never achieved even temporary success. I will not bore you with the quarrels, corruption, and lunatic expenditure which were contributed by all concerned in the production: the recital would be endless, and provide a kind of caricature of all such ventures. I will simply add that this particular darling of Charles's soul died a miserable death after the third dress rehearsal (naturally Charles insisted on one more dress rehearsal than was customary) when the Lady Macbeth, having sung her way through the greater part of the first act, suffered some extraordinary and inexplicable relapse.

There is one unusual moment when Duncan

mounts the steps up to his chamber in Macbeth's castle. Dead silence obtains (you will perceive this to be unusual in an opera, where peace and quiet are at an appalling premium): nobody sings, and even the orchestra is momentarily silent. The Macbeths are supposed to watch Duncan disappear into his chamber: an impressive pause is intended, broken, on this occasion, by Lady Macbeth (needless to say, the most expensive and notorious Italian soprano Charles could have engaged), who, with a sudden wild movement, broke away from *Macbeth*, and, uttering some violent exclamation (my Italian was not equal to it, but I assure you it was very dramatic), rushed up the staircase after Duncan. Four or five steps from the top, she sank to her knees and appeared alternatively to be praying, and grasping 'the desert air'. (At first I thought this scene was directed *at* Duncan: but when he turned and spoke to her, she seemed not to hear him.) Confusion, always lurking in readiness for just such moments, sprang joyfully into its own; and in less time than it takes me to write the sentence, the stage was flooded with people, all of whom had either long regarded Macbeth as an insufficient emotional outlet, or who had, I suspect, come up through the traps for the occasion.

Pandemonium ensued. Charles ensued. The consequence was fatal to Charles: pandemonium winning with a noisy vulgarity which, although well suited to Charles, must, in this particular situation, have been very painful to him.

I am quite unable to tell you what actually brought about the rout. Nobody seems really to know; any more than they know what possessed the undoubtedly beautiful Italian soprano to behave in so devastating a manner. The reason for the debacle would appear as the air she clutched. But that was the end. Madame Whatshername resolutely refused to sing Lady Macbeth; and there was nobody else available who knew the part. The Company, who had hitherto largely been stuck together by Charles's money, required so much more cement to perform the work minus the Lady, that even Charles blenched. I have since discovered that he is even paying Madame's fees in a nursing home where she has collapsed; paying them, I assure you, for no good or necessary reason. What can one do with such a man? At any moment he will acquire a reputation for being kind, a very dangerous one for a man with his wealth.

I pointed out to him only once that a party

would better have served his purpose, but I regret to say he knocked me down. I was in simple morning clothes, however, and forgave him. Perhaps, after all, he has the makings of an impresario.

I am, etc.

My father's next contribution at first glance appeared the most startling and valuable of all, but I had only to read a few lines to see what a baffling and exasperating anti-climax the thing must have been to him. It is no less than an interview which he obtained personally with Celin in London, some weeks after Mielli's death. He records it in simple dialogue: I think he can scarcely have dared to trust himself to any comments. I shall not repeat his painstaking cross-examination verbatim, but confine myself to those portions of it which seem to me dramatically relevant.

'Why did your mistress cease her professional career?'

'For the child.'

'What child was this? Her child?'

'A child for whom she felt responsible.'

'By whom did she have this child?'

'It was not a child she had borne herself.'

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'How do you know this?'

'I do know.'

'Well then, why did she select England as the place for her retirement?'

'She knew nobody, and was unknown. She did not wish to see people. She wished to be alone with the child.'

'What has happened to this mysterious child? Where is it?'

'It grew with her, and then one day it went.'

'Where?'

'I do not know. It simply disappeared.'

'Did she not search for it when it disappeared?'

'When it disappeared, it was no longer a child.'

'But why was it necessary for her to give up her career?'

'It required too much of her time. It demanded more and more of her time until she could do nothing else. All her days and many of her nights.'

'You stayed with her all the time?'

'In the house, yes, naturally. It was my promise.'

'Did she never sing?'

'The child did not like it. Eventually, she never sang.'

'Was she . . . did she become attached to this exacting charge?'

'I cannot answer that.'

'Were *you* fond of it?'

'I loved my mistress.'

'But the child. Did you love the child?'

Celin remained silent.

'Well, can you tell me anything about it? What kind of child was it?'

'How should I be able to tell you, sir? I never once saw it.'

'Do you mean she concealed it from you? For fifteen years!'

'She did not conceal it. It was simply not to be seen. I never once saw the child.'

After my father's death it was widely supposed that I should endeavour to follow in his footsteps. These steps, though unmistakable, were faint, and it soon became triumphantly clear to my seniors in the firm that I was not the man my father had been. Having made this welcome discovery they proceeded (until I learned better), to designate me for the trickier, less grateful pieces of diplomacy connected with our work. Thus it

was that I came to take Professor Cobalt round Golders Green.

The Professor (who was not a native of England) combined a predilection for sight-seeing with a strong tendency towards the macabre. He was in London for a month, knew nobody, and was engaged upon a book which we badly wanted to publish. He was a man of fiendish energy, and in a surprisingly short time he had closely inspected such sights as I, a mere Londoner, could muster, together with a remarkable variety of tombs, effigies, and instruments and places of violence discovered by himself. It was he who suggested the Crematorium at Golders Green, despite my assurances that it would provide no interest of the kind he sought. 'My dear boy,' he cried, 'have you seen it? Well what are we waiting for?'

As a matter of fact I had never seen it, and the Professor having forcefully assumed my curiosity, we set forth.

The Professor was disappointed. I think his spirits sank when he set eyes on the building (he had probably expected some neo-Gothic atrocity) for he began talking about the horrible joys of contrast: the combination of the everyday ordinary surroundings and the sinister personal detail producing an effect more grotesque than consistency could ever achieve. We inspected the details.

The Professor inspected them very thoroughly indeed. There was one better moment when he discovered newly cremated remains in brown cardboard boxes in the basement of a columbarium. But no flights of the imagination contrived to make those boxes anything more than boxes containing ashes. He shook one mournfully, remarked that it sounded like gravel, and dragged me on. He was indefatigable.

We thoroughly explored the garden. It took an hour. Returning to the entrance, I was thankfully remembering that the Professor did not eat or drink tea, when I felt again the fractious twitching of my coat sleeve which I knew heralded further inspection. 'There,' he was saying, 'we have not been down there.'

Patiently I followed him into another columbarium.

It was newer than the rest, and contained more flowers, and a notice to the effect that vases must be approved before they were installed.

It was there, among innumerable other memorials, that I noticed the tablet to Maria Mielli. There was nothing remarkable about it: it was simple, even commonplace, but beside it was a small alabaster jar containing three perfectly fresh and ravishing flowers. I drew the Professor's attention to them.

'Orchids,' he said, without a moment's hesitation, 'most unusual. I should say a cross between—' and he

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named two species which meant nothing to me. 'Difficult to rear in this country.'

I asked him whether he had ever heard Mielli.

'Never heard of her,' he replied turning away. He had lost interest.

It amused me to think that he knew so much of the orchids, and nothing of Mielli.

Left Luggage

THE first telegram arrived one morning early in September. It said: 'Would like visit you week or more if convenient immediately Fallard.' It was reply paid, which surprised me as much as the fact of it arriving at all. I was not very intimate with Fallard, but I knew enough of him to feel that only extreme intimacy or extreme urgency would prompt him to send a telegram; and that even then, he would be likely to expect a letter in reply. I was shocked into wiring him an invitation to come as soon as he liked.

Term having not yet started, I had little to do beyond enjoy my roses, which were exceptionally fine that year; and rearrange my small, but, I flatter myself, unusually interesting, library of books on exploration and travel. The society of somebody who was neither paying to be told what he could very well discover for himself; nor assisting in the generation of elementary

knowledge which has long since bored him to distraction, was inviting. I was inclined every year at the end of the long summer holidays to abuse and dislike a profession I had only chosen because it afforded me enough leisure for travelling. This year I had travelled: I was back; and was now, as it were, only awaiting the winter of my discontent; with any good prospect so distant as to seem a mere mirage.

My telegram dispatched, I spent the rest of the morning in a basket chair on the lawn, in idle speculation upon Fallard.

It is possible, though not likely, that he is known to you: Aubrey Giffard Hurst: A.G.H. Fallard; the writer of obscure biographies of famous men. That, I reflected, was possibly the mistake he made. He would exercise a small but probably quite sound talent on a subject so large and publicly inviting that it attracted the powers of men far more capable than he.

We were together at Cambridge; and had there contracted a friendship founded upon an enthusiastic, but, as it transpired, wholly ephemeral, passion for Bristol glass. Our interest was not fashionable, nor did either of us possess the personality to make it so: we were therefore much drawn together, although we rarely discussed anything beside our prevailing addiction. His friends called him A.G.H.; but I liked this mode of address no more

than he, and to me he was always Fallard. I do remember on one occasion a half-hearted attempt of mine to discuss our futures on leaving Cambridge. I suggested vaguely that I wanted to travel, and I remember the shocked hostility of his reply.

'Why on earth do you say that?' I asked. My feelings were hurt; I was nineteen, and liked complete approval of my ideas.

'I *hate* moving about. The essence of disintegration. One should remain in one place, in one house preferably, for one's entire life. Can't think if you keep juggling with environment.

We were silent for a time, and I felt that I had overstepped the boundary of a masculine friendship.

'If you care to come along to my rooms,' he said after the interval, 'my uncle has sent me a pair of wine-glasses.'

I followed him eagerly; but from that moment I think my interest in Bristol glass was a little forced; and cultivated rather because I required his company (I have never found friends easy to maintain), than for the original reason.

When we left Cambridge, he announced his intention of becoming a writer, casually, but with an assurance which implied that he had given the matter some thought. He would live in London, he said, and

although my home was in Scotland, he hoped that I should pay him a visit from time to time.

'What shall you write?' I had asked in some astonishment.

'Biographies,' he replied without hesitation. 'I haven't the imagination for a novelist. I seldom imagine anything.'

Perhaps that was another reason why his biographies were never very convincing. He had a talent, I discovered in the ensuing years, for turning the most adventurous, brilliant, and tragic lives into a pedestrian round; from which one felt only too glad to escape with the death of the subject at the end of the book. His method of treating any romantic incident he encountered in his literary activities was such as to gain the complete approval of many schools; and he is consequently to be found in their libraries. He was deliberate, painstaking, accurate, and as complete as it is possible for any biographer to be who has no personal interest in the matter (and no imagination). He was possessed of some private means, and he did exactly what he said he would do at Cambridge. He took a small house in Kensington and wrote; and for the following twenty years I saw him at increasing intervals when I was in London. I became a schoolmaster; I owned a house outside Edinburgh even smaller than his; and at first I frequently asked him to

stay with me. He would come if he was ever up there, he said; implying that he never would be—and he never was. I do not believe that he ever went anywhere. Why was he coming now? Was it possible that he intended writing the life of some eminent Scot? I considered his works: Nelson; Charles II; Cromwell; General Gordon; Shakespeare; Shelley (that had been the worst); and began to have serious fears for The Young Pretender or Mary Stuart.

The second telegram arrived just before dinner. It read: 'Arriving 8.30 Edinburgh Wednesday Fallard.' Wednesday was the next day, and I was even more astonished. I always remembered him as so deliberate in everything he did, so ordered, that two telegrams from him in the space of twelve hours greatly aroused my curiosity; and I wasted some time studying them, and trying to read into them some further meaning.

I went to the station the following morning and watched my friend walking down the platform towards me. I don't think he had seen me. He was carrying a Mackintosh, but no bag or case. As he drew nearer, I could see that he looked ill. He saw me, began to smile a little, glanced nervously behind him, and fumbled for his ticket which he handed to the collector; smiling at me again, or trying to smile. He really did look awfully ill.

Three Miles Up

'My dear chap . . .' I began, when the ticket collector interrupted us.

'I'm sorry, sir, but we can't take this you know.' And he held out Fallard's ticket with a reproachful expression.

Fallard seemed quite paralysed, and unable to command the situation; so I took the ticket and examined it.

'What's wrong with it?' I said, and then I realised. It was dated September 5th, 1897. I looked at Fallard again.

'I must have thrown it out,' he muttered; looked back at the train again; and fainted.

I paid his fare and got him into the car with the aid of a porter. He came round as soon as he was safely in the back seat; and then I remembered his luggage.

'Haven't you got any luggage?' Fallard! What about your luggage?'

'Oh *no!*' he cried and suddenly attempted to wind down the window of the car.

'Do you want air?' I said. 'I'll do it for you.'

He immediately left the handle alone and stared in front of him with a look of despair. I realised that there was something seriously wrong with him; so I tipped the porter to look for his suitcase, and said I should be back for it later in the day. I drove him home and put him to bed.

He slept immediately and heavily until late in the

afternoon, when he emerged without warning into the garden, looking pale, but neat and collected.

‘Come and sit down,’ I said. ‘I’ll order tea.’

I told my housekeeper to bring tea into the garden and then to leave us undisturbed until dinner. On previous occasions we had nearly always begun with a self-conscious and sterile little conversation about glass, in which, for some foolish reason, each expected the other still to be interested. This time, however, I felt things would be different.

I found him sitting in the chair where I had left him, and noticed for the first time how very grey he had become.

‘We are going to have tea in a minute,’ I said. ‘I should imagine you are famished.’

‘I hadn’t really thought about it,’ he replied.

He made some conventional remark a moment later about the beautiful evening, and admired my flowers. I took out my knife, and cutting a half-blown Etoile D’Hollande, presented it to him. He grasped it, eager to be grateful, I thought.

‘A beautiful colour,’ he murmured, and automatically lifted the rose in order to smell it.

‘They have a wonderful scent,’ I observed.

An extraordinary expression of—not quite horror, or revulsion, but something of both, crossed his face. He

Three Miles Up

threw the rose on the table between us, and glanced at me with the most intense suspicion, almost fear. There was an awkward silence. My housekeeper brought out tea, which she placed on the table; remarking, as she left us, that the gentleman's luggage had arrived from the station. I heard him make a sudden movement, and saw his hands clutching the wicker arms of his chair. This time he really was frightened: there was no doubt about it.

'Don't you think you had better tell me what is the matter?'

'My luggage! What luggage has arrived?'

'I don't know. What did you bring?'

'Go and see. I *implore* you to go and see. Go and look at it, and come back quickly and tell me what is there.'

'Of course I will go. You drink this while I'm gone.'

'Come *soon*,' he said; and his hands trembled so violently that the tea slopped into the saucer and on to the grass.

'A large black suitcase and a small Gladstone,' I reported. 'Is that right?'

'Is that all?'

'Should there be more?'

'No, no. You are absolutely sure that there was nothing else?'

'Absolutely certain. And now, my dear chap, have something to eat, and tell me what is troubling you so much.'

'It will all seem so very odd to you. I hardly know where to begin. I do not thoroughly understand it myself. You may think it absurd, but I assure you I am convinced of my having suffered a very narrow escape.'

I looked at him in some amazement but said nothing. He held out his cup for more tea: and then asked abruptly. 'You remember my uncle?'

I replied that I did. Was it not he who had sent the wine-glasses; and was he not very rich and eccentric?

'I don't know about that,' he replied cautiously. 'Well, yes, I suppose he was eccentric really. He had this large house, you know, in Richmond: and though at one time he used to travel about a good deal towards the end of his life he wouldn't move a yard. Wouldn't go out to lunch in the end. My family didn't approve of him: he was notorious for his affairs with women, with whom his success was almost vulgar in its uniformity.' He met my eye apologetically. I think he hoped to amuse me; and I threw him his bone. He was obviously feeling a little better.

'He never married, although at one time he was

reputed to have come very near it. I believe he backed out at the last minute.'

We smiled at each other in bachelor sympathy.

'He lived alone except for three servants. I think I was the only member of the family whom he liked. I was at any rate the only one in whom he took any interest. I used to have luncheon with him sometimes; and occasionally he would walk round his garden with me; but he would never go beyond the gates. After tea, he would sit in his enormous armchair and question me about the family. He never communicated his dislike of them directly, but I knew that it was very strong, and always felt uneasy and defensive. He would also ask me about myself—how did I occupy my time—in what was I interested—what did I think, and so on. I answered him as well as I could, but always with the feeling that my replies were in some way incomplete and unsatisfactory. He seemed particularly concerned with my personal affairs, and kept asking about my friends. Once he asked whether I had ever contemplated marriage "or anything of the kind". He pressed me so much that I remember feeling very angry, and announcing pointedly that I had never indulged in any vulgar intrigue; that I had no patience with people who were a slave to their sordid instincts which they invariably tried to idealise; and that

I, personally, would never consider walking across the street on account of any woman.

'He stared at me for a moment; I noticed that he had gone very white.

' "She might meet you half way," he said, and then he leaned back in his chair, and started to laugh. He laughed so much, and the expression in his eyes was so strange, that I thought he was ill. I offered to fetch someone, but he waved his hands and went on laughing, and eventually I left him there. I thought then that he was a little mad. I never saw him again. He died about three years ago. Exactly three.' Fallard repeated as though some unpleasant but significant thought was dawning in his mind.

'The other odd thing about his death was that it occurred in a train. Apparently he received an urgent summons to the sick-bed of his elder sister: and although he had never been much attached to her, and hated travelling, he went.' There was a brief pause.

'He was found dead in the morning by the guard of the Cornish express on which he had been travelling. Heart failure they said.'

'He never saw his sister!' I exclaimed foolishly. I noticed that Fallard's voice had contracted into a small slow monotone; and now he spoke as though he was counting his words.

Three Miles Up

'Oh no. But she didn't die, she was hardly ill at all. She said my uncle must have misread the telegram. She lived another two years. It was my uncle who died.'

'So he need never have attempted the journey?'

'No—yes. I don't think he could help it. Wait a minute. I must tell you in the right order. When he died, I found that he had left me a good deal of money, and a number of possessions. Furniture; silver; and a few pictures. The pictures were an odd lot. There were one or two quite valuable paintings; half a dozen engravings; and two old photographs; one of my mother, and one of some other woman whom I had never seen. I kept the one of my mother although it was a very poor photograph: but the other had no inscription on it, and as I could not identify it with any member of my family I threw it away.'

'Was she beautiful?' I asked.

'My mother?'

'The other woman.'

He thought for a moment. 'Proud,' he said. 'Very proud, and, well, yes, I suppose she *was* beautiful. I was chiefly struck by her arrogance. Why do you ask?'

'No reason. I suppose it was one of your uncle's romances.'

'I suppose so,' he agreed. 'I should think he rather let himself in for something there.'

'Some of the silver,' he continued, 'arrived at my house packed in a small dressing case, with a note to say that the case had been included with all its contents by my uncle in his bequest to me. The case was not very old but rather shabby, and although I had no particular use for it, I hardly liked to throw it away. I put it on top of my tallboy and forgot about it.'

'Well?' I asked. He seemed to have stopped.

'I was thinking,' he said. 'I cannot recall anything relevant happening for some time after that; indeed, except that I had rather more money and no longer went to Richmond for lunch, there was little change in my life. But about a year later—it must have been towards the end of the summer—I became slowly possessed of the most frantic and unaccountable desire to travel. I can hardly explain it. I have never suffered the slightest desire to go anywhere; and, with the exception of three or four duty visits to my sister in Kent, I have never done so.'

'What did you feel? How did it start?'

'I found that I could not sit still in a room; that I was unable to work. At first, no more than that. I would walk round the room; round the house; up and down the stairs; utterly unable to control myself. Then I found I was unable to sleep. I would lie and listen to the whistle of the trains in the night (that was how the desire to travel actually began); and each time I heard an engine

whistle, I suffered an agony from knowing it had gone without me; that I had missed that particular train; and was ignorant even of its destination. I imagined myself carried away with it roaring into the night; I imagined sleeping to the rocking sway of its coaches. I came to identify sleep with my lying motionless amid tremendous movement and continuous rhythmic sound. I battled with this new obsession for nearly a week and . . .'

'Why did you struggle against it?' I interrupted.

He seemed rather bewildered.

'I—it was so utterly unreasoning. It was against everything I knew about myself. I will tell you something else which made it worse, somehow. I say I battled against it. Twice I gave in. Twice, when I was walking about the streets, I took a taxi and went to the nearest railway station with every intention of satisfying my desire. But when I arrived at the station, and paid off the taxi, the desire went—disappeared completely; and I was left with an appalling sense of futility and depression. The first time this happened, I thought I was rid of it. I remember I walked home feeling curiously light-headed and irresponsible, absurdly proud of myself; as though I had won some victory. But I was no sooner seated in my study than it began again, and I was submerged in utter despair. I could see no way of dealing with it, you see. Resistance to it was simply depriving me of sleep, peace

of mind, and eventually, I thought, reason. Giving way to it seemed momentarily to dissolve the disease; but induced this terrible depression, coloured by my anticipation of its return. I do not know which was worse. I know that the second time I went on impulse to a station and found myself drained of all incentive to go anywhere, I prolonged the dreadful despairing walk home; although all the way I tortured myself by imagining the force and intensity with which I now knew my malady would return on entering my house. I took sleeping tablets for two nights; but although they caused sleep, they excited such dreadful dreams that I preferred to remain awake. As I say, after about a week of this, I decided on a definite course of action which I determined to carry out regardless of my feelings. I wrote to some people I knew slightly in Yorkshire, asking whether I might stay a few days with them; and went.

'My dreams had nearly always been connected with packing: I had left my packing too late, and was forced to fill an enormous trunk, which invariably caused me to miss my train. I therefore went to bed the night before my journey with everything ready. It was one of those still evenings, rather like this one, which are characteristic of early autumn. I felt very much calmer in my mind and slept almost immediately without dreaming.

'I was awakened very suddenly in the night, by a

single loud crash in my room, as though some heavy object had been thrown or dropped. My nerves were in a poor state, but I contrived to switch on the light by my bed, and clutching the blanket to my throat looked round the room. I saw at once what had happened. The dressing case in which the silver had arrived from my uncle's house had fallen off the top of the tallboy where I had put it. Wind, I thought; and instinctively looked at my window. But there was absolutely no wind. Moreover it had lain, or at least I had originally placed it, flat on the middle of the top of the tallboy; and it now lay in exactly the same position on the floor. It certainly seemed odd that it should have fallen the right way up—that it should have fallen at all from its secure position. Some servant, I thought uncertainly, must have been dusting the top and left the case on the edge, where the slightest reverberation would cause it to fall. I would put it back. As my hands touched the case, I suddenly wanted to open it, and snapped back the locks. A faint but not unpleasant odour rose from the inside. The dull green silk with which it was lined was not nearly as shabby as I remembered; indeed, although not brand new, it was neither rotting nor discoloured. And then, lying neatly at the bottom of the case, I discovered a pair of long suede gloves. They were dark green, and obviously belonged to a woman; apart from their shape, the

fingers, though long, were too narrow for any man. They smelt strongly of this same odour; indeed I think they were the original cause of it, as I certainly could not remember smelling anything when I unpacked the silver. Nor did I remember the gloves; but I reflected that I had unpacked the case with great haste; and the gloves were not very noticeable as they matched the silk lining and lay flat against the entire length of one side. I shut the case and went back to bed. The whole incident seemed odd; but you must remember that I was so obsessed by my trouble and the impending journey which was, I hoped, to effect its cure, that it seemed no more than odd; and after a short while, I dismissed it from my mind and slept.

‘The next day I went to Yorkshire. I experienced an exact repetition of my previous feelings on entering the railway station: but this time I forced myself to continue the experiment; and spent a miserable four days in Yorkshire. To my extreme relief and delight, I found when I returned that the obsession had gone; that I was again free, and able to continue my life without a vestige of my former neurosis.

‘When I returned, I replaced the dressing case on top of the tallboy. I had intended to have a further look at those green gloves before I did so. But they were not

there, and the odour had vanished with them. I questioned the maid who cleaned my room; but she denied ever having opened the case, or seen the gloves. "At any rate," I said severely, "you left the case in a most dangerous position after dusting the tallboy, so that it fell down in the night." She replied that she had never moved it; and for some weeks after, there reigned a mutual suspicion between us.'

He broke off for a moment, and regarded me half apologetically. 'I do hope,' he said, 'that I am able to make myself perfectly plain to you, and am not dull?'

I reassured him.

'It is a very great relief to tell you about it. I have never mentioned it to anyone.'

'Please go on.'

'It happened that a year ago last August, I was confined to my bed with summer influenza; when again this urgent and restless desire to travel overcame me.'

'Nothing strange had happened in between these attacks?'

'Nothing. I had written another book, and my anxiety had completely vanished. This time I was familiar with my symptoms, and could tell, or thought I could tell, what was coming next. Although far from well I was forced to get up from my bed, and walk the streets. The incident of going suddenly to a railway

station was repeated; but only once—for this time I was determined to do what I had finally done last year, and go away. I had been so miserable in Yorkshire, that I decided to try somewhere else; and hit upon Wales, where some friends of mine had taken a house for the summer. I wrote to them, and after several days of delay, which were most painful to me, I received a reply in the form of an invitation.

‘I packed one morning in the beginning of September and spent the rest of the day in my Club: telling the servant to put my luggage and sandwiches in the hall, as I should call for them in a taxi that evening. When I returned with the cab to fetch my luggage, I almost fell over the dressing case, which stood in the hall beside my Gladstone bag. I gave my own bag to the driver, and took the case upstairs to my room. As I threw it on the bed, I thought I heard, or felt, the faintest movement inside the case; as though it contained some small object. The gloves were there, I thought, and opened it to see. This time, however, it contained a long pair of heavy bronze silk stockings. I held them up. They were in perfect condition. The same perfume rose from the case, and with it all the sensations of a year ago struck me more sharply. I looked into the case more carefully, and discovered a pair of dark green silk garters, exactly matching the lining. I must confess that I was a little disturbed;

but my cab was waiting, and I was impatient to rid myself of the awful desire to travel. I replaced these strange garments, snapped the locks, and, putting the case in a cupboard, where no one would see it, left in my taxi. Again, on reaching the station, my desire to travel left me; again I continued my journey, was miserably discontented, and again returned, cured.

‘I found the suitcase where I had left it. It was empty, and the perfume had completely disappeared. Again I questioned my servant about it. She admitted carrying the dressing case downstairs, having found it on the bedroom floor beside my luggage; but persisted that she knew nothing of its contents, and, after some altercation, gave notice, and left me, which I have never ceased to regret.

‘And now we come to my telegram to you. This year I suffered a third attack; if possible, more intense than the previous two; which resulted, after several desperate letters to people in various parts of the country, in my soliciting your help. You replied at once. I think I should have gone mad if you had not. And I packed for the third time.’

‘Why did you have to stay with friends? Why did you not go to an hotel?’ I asked.

‘I had to have something at the other end. I suppose even then I was afraid.’

Left Luggage

‘I see.’

‘I had discovered more about my disease. I now knew that I wanted to sleep in the train; knew that I must travel at night. So this time I booked a first-class sleeper on the eleven-thirty. After I had packed, I went again to my Club—to take my mind off things, I think; and, picking up a taxi at about ten-thirty, I drove to Kensington to fetch my luggage and sandwiches. As we drew up to the door, I remembered that I had forgotten to pack the book I intended reading on the journey. I told the taxi driver to put my bags in the cab and dashed into my study for it.

‘On reaching the station, the driver switched on the light in the cab, in order that I might see to pay his fare. And there was the dressing case beside my own luggage. “Did you put this in?” I asked, pointing to it. He said of course he did; I had told him to do so; I had said my bags, hadn’t I? How was he to know? He seemed prepared to quarrel; and by the time I had rid myself of him, and found a porter, it was late, and I was afraid of losing my sleeper.

‘Strangely, my restlessness and excitement steadily increased from the time I arrived at the station, and as I followed the porter up the platform, it was as though I was waiting for something to happen: something planned

to happen at a precise moment; but I had no idea what it was, or when exactly it was due to occur.

'We found my sleeper, and I told the porter to put my black case and the dressing case in the van: I would retain only my Gladstone. My sleeper was a double one; but the porter assured me that I should be left to myself as it was a first, and in any case, a great many people went by the other route from King's Cross. I think I should have been glad of a companion: however, I tipped the porter, and he went.

'The train started almost immediately: I had cut it very fine. For about an hour I sat, desperately trying to read, and listening to the regular rhythmic rattle of the train which, contrary to my fevered imagination of it, did anything but soothe me: rather urged me on to a greater state of nervous excitement. After an hour of this, or possibly more, I felt that I must speak to someone or go mad. I must make it plain that I was not, at this point, in the least frightened; but unnaturally strung up, and unbalanced; and still possessed of this extraordinary feeling that something was going to happen.

'I made my way along the corridor, to the end where the attendant had his quarters. He was boiling a kettle, and reading the paper. The sight relieved me a little; and I wanted nothing more than to be allowed to stay and talk with him. He was a pleasant, unassuming

creature; fond of his job, and quite prepared to talk with me. He offered me a stool, and I sat drinking tea with him, and listening to his account of his family. He had a young boy under him, who was engaged in disposing of passengers' luggage, and arranging crockery for the early morning cup of tea. The boy came and went for an hour or so; and still I sat there very unwilling to leave the man and return to my sleeper. I could not help feeling that so long as I remained in his company, the crisis was staved off: but at length it became obvious that the attendant expected me to depart: and I could think of no excuse for remaining; so I went.

'The boy preceded me down the corridor to my sleeper. On reaching it, he knocked on the door, and then stood aside for me to go in. "You needn't do that," I said. He looked at me a little queerly, I thought, as I pulled back my door. It was then that I received an unpleasant shock. My bed was neatly turned down; and lying on the end of it, was the dressing case. "Did you bring this in here?" I asked, almost called, from the doorway. The boy was several yards down the corridor. He looked back, but did not stop. He seemed embarrassed. "I thought the lady would want it," he said. And I heard the coach door slam behind him.

'I slid my door to, and turned slowly to survey my sleeper. A sick creeping sense of panic possessed me.

What lady? I had ordered the case to be put in the van. Perhaps all passengers' luggage was put in charge of the sleeping car attendant. Perhaps. I pulled out my pipe. The air was very close, and I began to imagine that I smelt that curious perfume. It was very distinctive, and I can most nearly describe it as resembling decaying roses. I lit a match, but it immediately went out. My hands were trembling, and I had not bothered to shield the flame; but this had seemed unnecessary in the dead still atmosphere.

'After a few minutes I gave up trying to light my pipe. The floor was littered with dead matches, and I had an uneasy selfconscious feeling that my abortive efforts were being watched. For one moment I considered calling the attendant and asking him to remove the dressing case; but I lacked the initiative; and also suffered from an irrational fear that I should be violently prevented from doing so. I looked at the case again, and placing a hand on either end of it, lifted it a few inches off the bed.

'The case was heavy; and, almost mechanically, I opened it.

'It was entirely full, and lying on the top was a mass of dark green silk. I think it was at that moment that I became certain I was not alone in the sleeper. The odour increased: it hung in the air; and whether it had altered, or my feelings about it changed, I do not know; but it

no longer smelled pleasant. I went to the window, and with some difficulty released a blind, which flew up with a snap. I started, and turned round guiltily, as though I expected to see someone; but I could see nothing. I had intended opening the window; but I found myself examining the contents of the dressing case. Sitting down beside it, I drew out the garments; and, as I disturbed them, the odour became more intense. A dark green silk blouse; a skirt of some dark material; a scarf; silk pocket handkerchiefs; heavy silk stockings; underclothes; a pair of strong, but finely made corsets. Yes, and the gloves; the dark green gloves. And as I touched each garment, the impression of not being alone, of someone watching, grew stronger and stronger, until it seemed impossible that I could be so certain someone was there, in that small enclosed space, and not see who it was. My mind seemed to be racing; but the thoughts came with a horrible slowness, as in a nightmare. Now I longed to see my fellow occupant. I felt that if I knew exactly where she was, I should cease to feel so menaced, so paralysed by this slowly increasing but invisible personality. I plunged my hands into the clothes again, as though I was searching for her; and my fingers grasped a small sheet of paper. I drew it out of the case. It was limp, a little discoloured, and had been folded; folded for so long and so heavily that about two inches had evidently dropped off

the right-hand side and been lost. I turned away from the case towards the light at the head of my bed, and read it. I cannot remember quite all of it; it had evidently been written in haste, and was barely legible. It was not addressed to anyone; nor was it signed, although the signature may have been on the piece of paper that was lost.

*"I shall send this if you do not meet me
you promised. You know that I have given up
for this.*

*My whole heart, my spirit is in your
nor shall they ever leave you now. But if
I shall die, I pray that I may requite
one small part of the—— "*

then something I couldn't read. And then scrawled at the bottom.

"I am forced to send this."

'As I came to the end of this scrap of paper, a tear dropped on to it. I put up my hand to my eyes in some astonishment, but they were perfectly dry. I sat watching the tear dissolve the ink. There was an ice-cold sweat at

the back of my neck; the most terrible confusion in my mind.

'And then I did a very foolish thing—my only excuse being, that at the time it seemed inevitable; I did it almost as one possessed; as though it should have been done before. I tore the scrap of paper into tiny fragments, and they fell through my fingers on to the floor. There was a second's pause; nothing happened; the train continued to rattle and rock. And then the tension perceptibly increased; the odour became rank and overwhelming; and I had an hysterical sense of immediate danger. I seized the case, almost overturning it, and as I did so, I saw the white label they had stuck on the bottom corner at Euston—and something else. It was the corner of another white label underneath. At once, everything became clear. My uncle had taken this case on his last journey. Why had I not seen it before? My uncle's hatred of travelling. The express in which he had finally taken his last journey: whence he had not emerged alive. In a frenzy I turned to the window, and for what seemed an eternity—a hell of impotence—I struggled to open it; for although I could still see no one, feel nothing, my frantic efforts were fiercely resisted. Once the window began to open, and shut again suddenly; and I was sobbing in despair—pulling and tugging the strap against time, I was certain now, against time.

'The window fell down so suddenly in the end that I staggered back; and the curtain of cold fresh air was sweet and sharp on my face. I clutched handfuls of those soft silk clothes and crammed them out of the window; after a second's resistance they straightened themselves, flew out into the night, and were gone. One of the gloves caught itself in the side of the window; the fingers were curled round the frame, and I pushed it desperately to free them. I heaved the case half out of the window, but I had not shut it; the lid flapped open; and it stuck. I cursed with fear, but the delay proved to be fortunate; as a few minutes later the train began to cross a fairly broad river. I waited until we were nearing the middle; and then with one last effort threw the dressing case out. We were travelling too fast and it was too dark for me to see it touch the water.'

'And then?' I asked.

'I don't remember anything at all until we reached Edinburgh. They said something about my having locked my door; but I do not remember doing so. Perhaps she locked it. That is all, except that I could hardly believe this morning, can hardly believe even now, that I am finally rid of it, or *her*.'

He leaned forward, pathetically anxious.

'I am afraid of it coming back. I threw it in the river;

but I am afraid of it coming back. When your house-keeper said that my luggage had arrived I thought . . .’

‘I don’t think you will be troubled any more,’ I said. ‘And the ticket?’

‘I cannot explain the ticket. Perhaps *she* put it there. I only know that when the collector stopped me this morning it seemed a kind of final horror, as though she would eternally pursue me as she must have pursued my uncle.’

‘What about your uncle?’

‘He was a very old man. It required considerable strength to open that window.’

‘But did he know all this would happen to you?’

Fallard’s face became grim.

‘Well, he left me the dressing case and all its contents,’ he said.

He stayed with me a week, and then, when he had recovered sufficiently, I drove him back to London. He discovered his own ticket in the breast pocket of the coat in which he had travelled; and, after some delay, he succeeded in getting the money refunded him. He gave me permission to write about his three journeys, on condition that I did not publish while he was alive.

Mr Wrong

EVERYBODY—that is to say the two or three people she knew in London—told Meg that she had been very lucky indeed to find a car barely three years old, in such good condition and at such a price. She believed them gladly, because actually buying the car had been the most nerve-racking experience. Of course she had been told—and many times by her father—that all car dealers were liars and thieves. Indeed, to listen to old Dr Crosbie, you would think that nobody could *ever* buy a second-hand car, possibly even any *new* car, without its brakes or steering giving way the moment you were out of sight of the garage. But her father had always been of a nervous disposition: and as he intensely disliked going anywhere, and had now reached an age where he could fully indulge this disapprobation, it was not necessary to take much notice of him. For at least fifteen of her twenty-seven years Meg silently put up with his saying that there was

no place like home, until, certain that she had exhausted all the possibilities of the small market town near where they lived, she had exclaimed, 'That's just it, Father! That's why I want to see somewhere else—not like it.'

Her mother, who had all the prosaic anxiety about her only child finding 'a really nice young man, Mr Right' that kind, anxious mothers tend to have—especially if their daughter can be admitted in the small hours to be 'not exactly a beauty'—smiled encouragingly at Meg and said, 'but Humphrey, dear, she will always be coming back to stay. She *knows* this is her home, but all young girls need a change.' (The young part of this had become emphasised as Meg plodded steadily through her twenties with not a romance in sight.)

So Meg had come to London, got a job in an antique shop in the New King's Road, and shared a two-room flat with two other girls in Fulham. One of them was a secretary, and the other a model: both were younger than Meg and ten times as self-assured; kind to her in an off-hand manner, but never becoming friends, nothing more than people she knew—like Mr Whitehorn, who ran the shop that she worked in.

It was her mother who had given Meg £300 towards a car, as the train fares and subsequent taxis; were proving beyond her means. She spent very little in London: she had bought one dress at Laura Ashley, but had no

parties to go to in it, and lacked the insouciance to wear it to work. She lived off eggs done in various ways, and quantities of instant coffee—in the shop and in the flat. Her rent was comfortably modest by present-day standards, she walked to work, smoked very occasionally, and set her own hair. Her father had given her £100 when she was twenty-one: all of this had been invested, and to it she now added savings from her meagre salary and finally went off to one of London's northern suburbs to answer an advertisement about a second-hand MG.

The car dealer, whom she had imagined as some kind of tiger in a loud checked suit with whisky on his breath, had proved to be more of a wolf in a sheepskin car-coat—particularly when he smiled, which displayed a frightening number of teeth that seemed to stretch back in his raspberry mouth and down his throat with vulpine largesse. He smiled often, and Meg took to not looking at him whenever he began to do it. He took her out on a test drive: at first he drove, explaining all the advantages of the car while he did so, and then he suggested that she take over. This she did, driving very badly, with clashing of gears and stalling the engine in the most embarrassing places. 'I can see you've got the hang of it,' Mr Taunton said. 'It's always difficult driving a completely new car. But you'll find that she's most reliable: will start in all

weather, economical on fuel, and needs the minimum of servicing.'

When Meg asked whether the car had ever had an accident, he began to smile, so she did not see his face when he replied that it hadn't been an accident, just a slight brush. 'The respray, which I expect you've noticed, was largely because the panel-work involved, and mind you, it *was* only panel-work, made us feel that it could do with a more cheerful colour. I always think aqua-blue is a nice colour for a ladies' car. And this is definitely a ladies' car.'

She felt his smile receding when she asked how many previous owners the car had had. He replied that it had been for a short time the property of some small firm that had since gone out of business. 'Only driven by one of the directors and his secretary.'

That sounded all right, thought Meg: but she was also thinking that for the price this was easily the best car she could hope for, and somehow, she felt, he knew that she knew she was going to buy it. His last words were: 'I hope you have many miles of motoring before you, madam.' The elongated grin began, and as it was for the last time, she watched him—trying to smile back—as the pointed teeth became steadily more exposed down his cavernous throat. She noticed then that his pale grey eyes very nearly met, but were narrowly saved from this

by the bridge of his nose, which was long and thrusting, and almost made up for his having a mouth that had clearly been eaten away by his awful quantity of teeth. They had nothing going for each other beyond her buying and his selling a car.

Back in the showroom office, he sank into his huge moquette chair and said: 'Bring us a coffee, duck. I've earned it.' And a moony-faced blonde in a mini-skirt with huge legs that seemed tortured by her tights, smiled and went.

Meg drove the MG—*her* car—back to London in the first state of elation she had ever known since she had won the bending competition in a local gymkhana. She had a car! Neither Samantha nor Val were in such a position. She really drove quite well, as she had had a temporary job working for a doctor near home who had lost his licence for two years. Away from Mr Taunton (*Clive* Taunton he had repeatedly said), she felt able and assured. The car was easy to drive, and responded, as MGs do, with a kind of husky excitement to speed.

When she reached the flat, Samantha and Val were so impressed that they actually took her out to a Chinese meal with their two boyfriends. Meg got into her Laura Ashley dress and enjoyed every sweet and sour moment of it. Everybody was impressed by her, and this made her prettier. She got slightly drunk on rice wine and

lager and went to work the next day, in her car, feeling much more like the sort of person she had expected to feel like in London. Her head ached, but she had something to show for it: one of the men had talked to her several times—asking where she lived and what her job was, and so forth.

Her first drive north was the following Friday. It was cold, a wet and dark night—in January she never finished at the shop in time even to start the journey in the light—and by the time she was out of the rush, through London and on Hendon Way, it was raining hard. She found the turn off to the M1 with no difficulty: only three hours of driving on that and then about twenty minutes home. It was nothing, really; it just seemed rather a long way at this point. She had drunk a cup of strong black instant at Mr Whitehorn's, who had kindly admired the car and also showed her the perfect place to park it every day, and she knew that her mother would be keeping something hot and home-made for her whatever time she got home. (Her father never ate anything after eight o'clock in the evening for fear of indigestion, something from which he had never in his life suffered and attributed entirely to this precaution.)

Traffic was fairly heavy, but it seemed to be more lorries than anything else, and Meg kept on the whole to the middle lane. She soon found, as motorists new to a

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motorway do, that the lanes, the headlights coming towards her, and the road glistening with rain had a hypnotic effect, as though she and the car had become minute, and she was being spun down some enormous, endless striped ribbon. 'I mustn't go to sleep,' she thought. Ordinary roads had too much going on in them for one to feel like that. About half her time up the motorway, she felt so tired with trying not to feel sleepy that she decided to stop in the next park, open the windows and have a cigarette. It was too wet to get out, but even stopping the windscreen-wipers for a few minutes would make a change. She stopped the engine, opened her window, and before she had time to think about smoking again, fell asleep.

She awoke very suddenly with a feeling of extreme fear. It was not from a dream; she was sitting in the driver's seat, cramped, and with rain blowing in through the open window, but something else was very wrong. A sound—or noises, alarming in themselves, but, in her circumstances, frighteningly out of place. She shut her window except for an inch at the top. This made things worse. What sounded like heavy, laboured, stertorous, even painful breathing was coming, she quickly realised, from the *back* of the car. The moment she switched on the car light and turned round, there was utter silence, as sudden as the noise stopping in the middle of a breath.

There was nobody in the back of the car, but the doors were not locked, and her large carrier bag—her luggage—had fallen to the floor. She locked both doors, switched off the car light and the sounds began again, exactly where they had left off—in the middle of a breath. She put both the car light and her headlights on, and looked again in the back. Silence, and it was still empty. She considered making sure that there was nobody parked behind her, but somehow she didn't want to do that. She switched on the engine and started it. Her main feeling was to get away from the place as quickly as possible. But even when she had started to do this and found herself trying to turn the sounds she had heard into something else and accountable, they wouldn't. They remained in her mind, and she could all too clearly recall them, as the heavy breaths of someone either mortally ill, or in pain, or both, coming quite distinctly from the back of the car. She drove home as fast as she could, counting the minutes and the miles to keep her mind quiet.

She reached home—a stone and slate-roofed cottage—at a quarter past nine, and her mother's first exclamation when she saw her daughter was that she looked dreadfully tired. Instantly, Meg began to feel better; it was what her mother had always said if Meg ever did anything for very long away from home. Her father had

gone to bed: so she sat eating her supper with surprising hunger, in the kitchen, and telling her mother the week's news about her job and the two girls she shared with and the Chinese-meal party. 'And is the car nice, darling?' her mother asked at length. Meg started to speak, checked herself, and began again. 'Very nice. It was so kind of you to give me all that money for it,' she said.

The weekend passed with almost comforting dullness, and Meg did not begin to dread returning until after lunch on Sunday. She began to say that she ought to pack; her mother said she must have tea before she left, and her father said that he didn't think that *anyone* should drive in the dark. Or, indeed, at all, he overrode them as they both started saying that it was dark by four anyway. Meg eventually decided to have a short sleep after lunch, drink a cup of tea and then start the journey. 'If I eat one of Mummy's teas, I'll pass out in the car,' she said, and as she said 'pass out', she felt an instant, very small, ripple of fear.

Her mother woke her from a dreamless, refreshing sleep at four with a cup of dark, strong Indian tea and two Bourbon biscuits.

'I'm going to pack for you,' she said firmly. She had also unpacked, while Meg was finishing her supper on Friday night. 'I've never known such a hopeless packer. All your clothes were cramped up and crushed together

as though someone had been stamping on them. Carrier bags,' she scolded, enjoying every minute; 'I'm lending you this nice little case that Auntie Phil left me.'

Meg lay warmly under the eiderdown in her own room watching her mother, who quite quickly switched from packing to why didn't Meg drink her tea while it was hot. 'I know your father won't drink anything until it's lukewarm, but thank goodness, you don't take after him. In that respect,' she ended loyally, but Meg knew that her mother missed her, and got tired and bored dealing with her father's ever-increasing regime of what was good or bad for him.

'Can I come next weekend?' she asked. Her mother rushed across the room and enfolded her.

'I should be most upset if you didn't,' she said, trying to make it sound like a joke.

When Meg left, and not until she was out of sight of home, she began to worry about what had happened on the journey up. Perhaps it could have been some kind of freak wind, with the car window open, she thought. Being able even to think that encouraged her. It was only raining in fits and starts on the way back, and the journey passed without incident of any kind. By the time Meg had parked, and slipped quietly into the flat that turned out to be empty both girls were out—she really began to imagine that she had imagined it. She ate a

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boiled egg, watched a short feature on Samantha's television about Martinique, and went to bed.

The following weekend was also wet, but foggy as well. At one moment during a tedious day in the shop (where there was either absolutely nothing to do, or an endless chore, like packing china and glass to go abroad), Meg thought of putting off going to her parents but they were not on the telephone, and that meant that they would have to endure a telegram. She thought of her father, and decided against that. He would talk about it for six months, stressing it as an instance of youthful extravagance, reiterating the war that it had made upon his nerves, and the proof it was that she should never have gone to London at all. No—telegrams were out, except in an emergency. She would just have to go—whatever the weather, or anything else.

Friday passed tediously: her job was that of packing up the separate pieces of a pair of giant chandeliers in pieces of old newspaper and listing what she packed. Sometimes she got so bored by this that she even read bits from the old, yellowing newsprint. There were pages in one paper of pictures of a Miss World competition: every girl was in a bathing-dress and high-heeled shoes, smiling that extraordinary smile of glazed triumph. They

must have an awfully difficult time, Meg thought—fighting off admirers. She wondered just how difficult that would turn out to be. It would probably get easier with practice.

At half past four, Mr Whitehorn let her go early: he was the kind of man who operated in bursts of absent-minded kindness, and he said that in view of her journey, the sooner she started the better. Meg drank her last cup of instant coffee, and set off.

Her progress through London was slow, but eventually she reached Hendon Way. Here, too, there were long hold-ups as cars queued at signal lights. There were also straggling lines of people trying to get lifts. She drove past a good many of these, feeling her familiar feelings about them, so mixed that they cancelled one another out, and she never, in fact, did anything about the hitchers. Meg was naturally a kind person: this part of her made her feel sorry for the wretched creatures, cold, wet, and probably tired; wondering whether they would *ever* get to where they wanted to be. But her father had always told her never to give lifts, hinting darkly at the gothic horrors that lay in wait for anyone who ever did that. It was not that Meg ever consciously agreed with her father; rather that in all the years of varying warnings, some of his anxiety had brushed off on her—making her shy, unsure of what to do about

things, and feeling ashamed of feeling like that. No, she was certainly not going to give anyone a lift.

She drove steadily on through the driving sleet, pretending that the back of her car was full of pieces of priceless chandeliers, and this served her very well until she came to the inevitable hold-up before she reached Hendon, when a strange thing happened.

After moving a few yards forwards between each set of green lights, she finally found herself just having missed yet another lot, but head of the queue in the right-hand lane. There, standing under one of the tall, yellow lights, on an island in the streaming rain, was a girl. There was nothing in the least remarkable about her appearance at first glance: she was short, rather dumpy, wearing what looked like a very thin Mackintosh and unsuitable shoes; her head was bare; she wore glasses. She looked wet through, cold and exhausted, but above all there was an air of extreme desolation about her, as though she was hopelessly lost and solitary. Meg found, without having thought at all about it, that she was opening her window and beckoning the girl towards the car. The girl responded—she was only a few yards away—and as she came nearer, Meg noticed two other things about her. The first was that she was astonishingly pale—despite the fact that she had dark, reddish hair and was obviously frozen: her face was actually livid, and

when she extended a tentative hand in a gesture that was either seeking reassurance about help, or anticipating the opening of the car door, the collar of her Mackintosh moved, and Meg saw that, at the bottom of her white throat, the girl had what looked like the most unfortunate purple birth mark.

'Please get in,' Meg said, and leaned over to open the seat beside her. Then two things happened at once. The girl simply got into the back of the car—Meg heard her open the door and shut it gently, and a man, wearing a large, check overcoat, tinted glasses and a soft black hat tilted over his forehead slid into the seat beside her.

'How kind,' he said, in a reedy, pedagogic voice (almost as though he was practising to be someone else, Meg thought); 'we were wondering whether anyone at all would come to our aid, and it proves that charming young women like yourself behave as they appear. The Good Samaritan is invariably feminine these days.'

Meg, who had taken the most instant dislike to him of anyone she had ever met in life, said nothing at all. Then, beginning to feel bad about this, at least from the silent girl's point of view, she asked:

'How far are you going?'

'Ah, now that will surprise you. My secretary and I broke down this morning on our way up, or down to Town,' he sniggered; 'and it is imperative that we present

ourselves in the right place at the right time this evening. I only wish to go so far as to pick up our car, which should now be ready.' His breath smelled horribly of stale smoke and peppermints.

'At a garage?' The whole thing sounded to Meg like the most preposterous story.

'Between Northampton and Leicester.' I shall easily be able to point the turning out to you.'

Again, Meg said nothing, hoping that this would put a stop to his irritating voice. 'What a bore,' she thought: 'I *would* be lumbered with this lot.' She began to consider the social hazards of giving people lifts. Either they sat in total silence—like the girl in the back—or they talked. At this point he began again.

'It is most courageous of you to have stopped. There are so many hooligans about, that I always say it is most unjust to the older and more respectable people. But it is true that an old friend of mine once gave a lift to a *young man*, and the next thing she knew, the poor dear was in a ditch; no car, a dreadful headache, and no idea where she was. It's perfectly ghastly what some people will do to some people. Have you noticed it? But I imagine you are too young: you are probably in search of *adventure—romance*—or whatever lies behind those euphemisms. Am I right?'

Meg, feeling desperately that *anything* would be

better than this talking all the time, said over her shoulder to her obstinately silent passenger in the back: 'Are you warm enough?'

But before anyone else could have said anything, the horrible man said at once: 'Perfectly, thank you. Physically speaking, I am not subject to great sensitivity about temperature.' When he turned to her, as he always seemed to do, at the end of any passage or remark, the smell of his breath seemed to fill the car. It was not simply smoke and peppermints—underneath that was a smell like rotting mushrooms. 'She must be asleep,' Meg thought, almost resentfully—after all there was no escape for *her*—*she* could not sleep, was forced to drive and drive and listen to this revolting front-seat passenger.

'Plastic,' he continued ruminatively (as though she had even *mentioned* the stuff), 'the only real use that plastic has been to society was when the remains, but unmistakable—unlike the unfortunate lady—when the remains of Mrs Durand Deacon's red plastic handbag were discovered in the tank full of acid. Poor Haigh must have thought he was perfectly safe with acid, but of course, he had not reckoned on the durable properties of some plastics. That was the end of *him*. Are you familiar with the case at all?'

'I'm not very interested in murder, I'm afraid.'

'Ah—but fear and murder go hand in hand,' he said

at once, and, she felt, deliberately misunderstanding her. She had made the mistake of apologising for her lack of interest—

‘ . . . in fact, it would be difficult to think of any murder where there had not been a modicum, and sometimes, let’s face it, a very great deal of fear.’ Glancing at him, she saw that his face, an unhealthy colour, or perhaps that was the headlights of oncoming cars, was sweating. It could not still be rain: the car heater was on: it was sweat.

She stuck it out until they were well on the way up the M1. His conversation was both nasty and repetitive, or rather, given that he was determined to talk about fear and murder, he displayed a startling knowledge of different and horrible cases. Eventually, he asked suddenly whether she would stop for him, ‘a need of nature’, he was sure she would understand what he meant. Just there a lorry was parked on the shoulder, and he protested that he would rather go on—he was easily embarrassed and preferred complete privacy. Grimly, Meg parked.

‘That will do perfectly well,’ she said as firmly as she could, but her voice came out trembling with strain.

The man slid out of the car with the same reptilian action she had noticed when he got in. He did not reply. The moment that he was out, Meg said to the girl: ‘Look

here, if he's hitching lifts with you, I do think you might help a bit with the conversation.'

There was no reply. Meg, turning to the back, began almost angrily: 'I don't care if you are asleep—' but then she had to stop because a small scream seemed to have risen in her throat to check her.

The back seat was empty.

Meg immediately looked to see whether the girl could have fallen off the back seat on to the floor. She hadn't. Meg switched on the car light; the empty black mock-leather seat glistened with emptiness. For a split second, Meg thought she might be going mad. Her first sight of the girl, standing under a lamp on the island at Hendon, recurred sharply. The pale, thin Mac, the pallor, the feeling that she was so desolate that Meg had *had* to stop for her. But she had *got into* the car—of course she had! Then she must have got out, when the man got out. But he hadn't shut his door, and there had been no noise from the back. She looked at the back doors. They were both unlocked. She put out her hand to touch the seat: it was perfectly dry, and that poor girl had been so soaked when she had got in—*had got in*—she was certain of it, that if she had *just* got out, the seat would have been at least damp. Meg could hear her heart thudding now, and for a moment, until he returned, she was almost glad

that even that man was some sort of company in this situation.

He seemed to take his time about getting back into the car: she saw him—as she put it—slithering out of the dark towards her, but then he seemed to hesitate; he disappeared from sight, and it was only when she saw him by the light of her right-hand side light that she realised he had been walking round the car. *Strolling* about, as though she was simply a chauffeur to him! She called through the window to him to hurry up, and almost before he had got into the car, she said, ‘What on earth’s become of your secretary?’

There was a slight pause, then he turned to her: ‘My secretary?’ His face was impassive to the point of offensiveness, but she noticed that he was sweating again.

‘You know,’ she said impatiently; she had started the engine and was pulling away from the shoulder: ‘The girl you said you’d had a breakdown with on your way to London.’

‘Ah yes: poor little Muriel. I had quite forgotten her. I imagine her stuffing herself with family high tea and, I don’t doubt, boyfriend—some provincial hairdresser who looks like a pop star, or perhaps some footballer who looks like a hairdresser.’

‘What *do* you mean?’

He sniggered. ‘I am not given to oversight into the

affairs of any employee I may indulge in. I do not like prolonged relationships of any kind. I like them sudden—short—and sweet. In fact, I—'

'No—*listen!* You know perfectly well what I'm talking about'

She felt him stiffen, become still with wariness. Then, quite unexpectedly, he asked: 'How long have you had this car?'

'Oh—a week or so. Don't make things up about your secretary. It was her I really stopped for. I didn't even see you.'

It must be his sweat that was making the car smell so much worse. 'Of course, I noticed at once that it was an MG,' he said.

'The girl in the back,' Meg said desperately: he seemed to be deliberately stupid as well as nasty. 'She was standing on the island, under a lamp. She wore a Mac, but she was obviously soaked to the skin, I beckoned to her, and she came up and got into the back without a word. At the same time as you. So come off it, inventing nasty, sneering lies about your secretary. Don't pretend *you* didn't know she was there. You probably used her as a decoy—to get a lift at all.'

There was a short, very unpleasant silence. Meg was just beginning to be frightened, when he said, 'What did your friend look like?'

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It was no use quibbling with him about not being the girl's friend. Meg said: 'I told you . . .' and instantly realised that she had done nothing of the kind. Perhaps the girl really hadn't been his secretary . . .

'All you have done is allege that you picked up my secretary with me.'

'All right. Well, she was short—she wore a pale Mac—I told you that—and, and glasses—her hair was a dark reddish colour—I suppose darker because she was wet through, and she had some silly shoes on and she looked *ill*, she was so white—a sort of livid white, and when she—'

'Never heard of her—never heard of anyone like her.'

'No, but you *saw* her, didn't you? I'm sorry if I thought she was your secretary—the point is you saw her, didn't you? *Didn't* you?'

He began fumbling in his overcoat pocket, from which he eventually drew out a battered packet of sweets, the kind where each sweet is separately wrapped. He was so long getting a sweet out of the packet and then starting to peel off the sticky paper that she couldn't wait.

'Another thing. When she put out her arm to open the door, I saw her throat—'

His fingers stopped unwrapping the paper. She

glanced at them: he had huge, ugly hands that looked the wrong scale beside the small sweet—

‘She had a large sort of birth mark at the bottom of her throat, poor thing.’

He dropped the sweet: bent forward in the car to find it. When, at last, he had done so, he put it straight into his mouth without attempting to get any more paper off.

Briefly, the smell of peppermint dominated the other, less pleasant odours. Meg said, ‘Of course, I don’t suppose for a moment you could have seen *that*.’

Finally, he said: ‘I cannot imagine who, or what, you are talking about. I didn’t see any *girl* in the back of *your* car.’

‘But there couldn’t be someone in the back of my car without my knowing’

There seemed to Meg to be something wrong about his behaviour. Not just that it was unpleasant; wrong in a different way; she felt that he knew perfectly well about the girl, but wouldn’t admit it—to frighten her, she supposed.

‘Do you mind if I smoke?’

He seemed to be very bad at lighting it. Two matches wavered out in his shaky hands before he got an evil-smelling fag going.

Meg, because she still felt a mixture of terror and

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confusion about what had or had not happened, decided to try being very reasonable with him.

'When you got into the car,' she began carefully, 'you kept saying "we" and talking about your secretary. *That's* why I thought she must be.'

'Must be what?' A mechanical response; sort of playing-for-time stuff, Meg thought

'You must excuse me, but I really don't know what you are talking about.'

'Well, I think you *do*. And before you can say "do what?" I mean *do* know what you are talking about'

She felt, rather than saw him glance sharply at her, but she kept her eyes on the road. Then he seemed to make up his mind. 'I have a suggestion to make. Supposing we stop at the next service area and you tell me all about everything? You have clearly got a great deal on your mind; in fact, you show distinct symptoms of being upset Perhaps if we—'

'No thank you.' The idea of his being the slightest use to talk to was both nauseating and absurd. She heard him suck in his breath through his teeth with a small hissing sound: once more she found him reminding her of a snake. Meg hated snakes.

Then he began to fumble about again, to produce a torch and to ask for a map. After some ruminating aloud as to where they were, and indeed where his garage was

likely to be, he suggested stopping again 'to give my, I fear, sadly weakened eyes an opportunity to discover my garage'.

Something woke up in Meg, an early warning or premonition of more, and different trouble. Garages were not marked on her map. She increased their speed, stayed in the middle lane until a service station that she had noticed marked earlier at half a mile away loomed and glittered in the wet darkness. She drove straight in and said:

'I don't like you very much. I'd rather you got out now.' Again she heard him suck his breath in through his teeth. The attendant had seen the car, and was slowly getting into his anorak to come out to them.

'How cruel!' he said, but she sensed his anger. 'What a pity! What a chance lost!'

'Please get out at once, or I'll get the man to turn you out.'

With his usual agility, he opened the door at once, and slithered out

'I'm sorry,' Meg said weakly: 'I'm sure you did know about the girl. I just don't trust you.'

He poked his head in through the window. 'I'm far from sure that *I* trust *you*.' There were little bits of scum at the ends of his mouth. 'I really feel that you oughtn't

to drive alone if you are subject to such extreme hallucinations.'

There was no mistaking the malice in his voice, and just as Meg was going to have one last go at his admitting that he *had* seen the girl, the petrol attendant finally reached her and began unscrewing her petrol cap. He went, then. Simply withdrew his head, as though there were not more of him than that, and disappeared.

'How many?'

'Just two, please.'

When the man went off slowly to get change, Meg wanted to cry. Instead, she locked all the doors and wound up the passenger window. She had an unreasonable fear that he would come back and that the attendant might not help her oust him. She even forgot the change, and wound up her own window, so that nobody could get into the car. This made the attendant tap on her window; she started violently, which set her shivering.

'Did you—did you see where the man who was in the front of my car went? He got out just now.'

'I didn't see anyone. Anyone at all'

'Oh, thank you.'

'Night.' He went thankfully back to his brightly lit and doubtless scorching booth.

Before she drove off, Meg looked once more at the back seat. There was no one there. The whole experience

had been so prolonged, as well as unnerving, that apart from feeling frightened she felt confused. She wanted badly to get away as fast as possible, and she wanted to keep quite still and try to sort things out. He *had* known that the girl had been in the car. He had enjoyed—her fear. Why else would he have said ‘we’ so much? This made her more frightened, and her mind suddenly changed sides.

The girl *could not* have got out of the back without opening and shutting—however quietly—the door. There had been no sound or sounds like that. In fact, from the moment the girl had got into the car she had made no sound at all. Perhaps she, too, had been frightened by the horrible man. Perhaps she had *pretended* to get in, and at the last moment, slipped out again.

She opened her window wide to get rid of the smells in the car. As she did so, a possible implication of what the petrol attendant had said occurred. He hadn’t seen *anyone*; he hadn’t emphasised it like that, but he had repeated ‘anyone at all’. Had he just meant that he hadn’t looked? Or had he looked, and seen nobody? Ghosts don’t talk, she reminded herself, and at once was back to the utterly silent girl.

Her first journey north in the car, and the awful breathing sounds coming from its back, could no longer be pushed out of her mind. The moment that she

realised this, both journeys pounced forward into incomprehensible close-ups of disconnected pictures and sounds, recurring more and more rapidly, but in different sequences, as though, through their speed and volume, they were trying to force her to understand them. In the end, she actually cried out: 'All *right!* The car is haunted. Of course, I see that!'

A sudden calm descended upon her, and in order to further it, or at least stop it as suddenly stopping, she added: 'I'll think about it when I get home,' and drove mindlessly the rest of the way. If any spasm about what had recently happened attempted to invade her essential blankness, she concentrated upon seeing her mother's face, smelling the dinner in the kitchen, and hearing her father call out who was there.

' . . . thought he might be getting a severe cold, so he's off to bed. He's had his arrowroot with a spot of whisky in it and asked us to be extra quiet in *case* he gets a wink of sleep.'

Meg hugged her without replying: it was no good trying to be conspiratorial with her mother about her father; there could never be a wink or a smile. Her mother's loyalty had stiffened over the years, until now she could relate the most absurd details of her father's imaginary fears and ailments with a good-natured but

completely impassive air. 'Have we got anything to drink?' she asked.

'Darling—I'm sure we have somewhere. But it's so unlike you to want a drink that I didn't put it out. It'll be in the corner cupboard in the sitting-room.'

Meg knew this, knew also that she would find the untouched half-bottles of gin and Bristol Milk that were kept in case anyone 'popped in'. But the very few people who did always came for cups of tea or coffee at the appropriate times of day. Her parents could not really afford drink—except for her father's medicinal whisky.

When she brought the bottles into the kitchen, she said, 'You have one too. I shall feel depraved drinking all by myself.'

'Well dear, then I'll be depraved with you. Just a drop of sherry. We needn't tell Father. It might start him worrying about your London Life. Been meeting anyone interesting lately?'

Meg had offered her mother a cigarette with her sherry, her mother, delighted, had nearly burned her wispy fringe bending over the match to light it, and was now blowing out frantic streams of smoke from her nose before it got too far. It was all right to smoke if you didn't inhale. On a social occasion, that was. Like it being all right to drink a glass of sherry at those times.

'This is nice,' her mother said, and then added,

'Have you been *meeting* anyone nice, dear? At all your parties and things?'

It was then that Meg realised that she could not possibly—ever—pour out all her anxieties to her mother. Her mother simply would not be able to understand them. 'Not this week,' she said. Her mother sighed, but Meg was not meant to hear, and said that she supposed it took time in a place like London to know people.

Meg had a second, strong gin, and then said that she would pay her mother back, but she was tired, and needed a couple of drinks. She also smoked four cigarettes before dinner, and felt so revived that she was able to eat the delicious steak-and-kidney pie followed by baked apples with raisins in them. Her mother had been making Meg Viyella nightgowns with white lace ruffles, and wanted to show them to her. They were brought into the kitchen, which was used for almost everything in winter as it saved fuel. 'I've been quite excited about them,' her mother said, when she laid out the nightgowns. 'Not quite finished, but such fun doing each one in a different colour.'

She listened avidly when Meg told her things about Mr Whitehorn and the shop: she even liked being told about the *things* in the shop. She laughed at Meg's descriptions when they were meant to be in the least amusing, and looked extremely earnest and anxious when

Meg told her about the fragility and value of the chandeliers. When it was time to go to bed, and she had filled their two hot-water bottles, she accompanied Meg to the door of her bedroom. They kissed, and her mother said: 'Bless you, dearie. I don't know what I'd do without you. Although, of course, one of these days I shall have to when Mr Right comes along.'

Meg cleaned her teeth in the ferociously cold bathroom and went back to her—nearly as cold—bedroom. Hot-water bottles were essential: Viyella nightdresses would be an extra comfort. From years of practice, she undressed fast and ingeniously, so that at no time was she ever naked. Whenever her mother mentioned Mr Right she had a vision of a man with moustaches and wearing a bowler hat mowing a lawn. She said her prayers kneeling beside her high, rather uncomfortable bed, and the hot-water bottle was like a reward.

In the night she awoke once, her body tense and crowded with fears: 'I could *sell* the car, and get another,' she said, and almost at once relaxed, the fears receded until they fell through some blank slot at the back of her mind and she was again asleep.

This decision, combined with a weekend of comfortably the same ordered, dull events made her able to set aside, almost to shut up, the things—as she called them—that had happened, or seemed to have happened,

in the car. On Sunday morning she found her mother packing the back with some everlasting flowers 'for your flat', a huge, dark old tartan car-rug 'in case you haven't enough on your bed', and a pottery jar full of home-made marmalade 'to share with your friends at breakfast'.

'There's plenty of room for the things on the floor, as you're so small, really, that you have your driving seat pushed right forward'

When she said good-bye and set off, it was with the expectation of the journey to London being uneventful, and it was.

The trouble, she discovered, after trying in her spare time for a week, was that she *could not* sell the car. She had started with the original dealer who had sold it to her, but he had said, with a bland lack of regret, that he was extremely sorry, but this was not the time of year to sell second-hand cars and that the best he could offer was to take it back for a hundred pounds less than she had paid for it. As this would completely rule out having any other car excepting a smashed-up or clapped-out Mini that would land her with kinds of garage bills (and, like most car-owners, Meg was not mechanically minded), she had to give up that idea from the start.

She advertised in her local newspaper shop (cheap,

and it would be easy for people to try out the car) but this only got her one reply: a middle-aged lady with a middle-aged poodle who came round one evening. At first it seemed hopeful; the lady said it was a nice colour and looked in good condition, but when she got into the driver's seat with Meg beside her to drive it round the block, her dog absolutely refused to get in the back as he was told to do. His owner tried coaxing, and he whimpered and scrabbled out of the still-open door; she tried a very unconvincing authority: 'Cherry! Do as you told at once,' and his whimpering turned to a series of squealing yelps. 'He *loves* going in cars. I don't know what's come over him!'

Out in the street again, all three of them, he growled and tried to snap at Meg. 'I'm sorry dear, but I can't possibly buy a car that Cherry won't go in. He's all I've got. Naughty Cherry. He's usually such a mild, sweet dog. Don't you dare bite at Mummy's friends.'

And that was that. She asked Mr Whitehorn and her flatmates, and finally, their friends, but nobody seemed to want buy her car, or even wanted to help her get rid of it. By Friday, Meg was in a panic at the prospect of driving north again in it. She had promised herself that she wasn't going to, and as long as the promise had seemed to hold (surely she could find *someone* who would want it) she had been able not to think about the

alternative. By Friday morning she was so terrified that she did actually send a telegram to her mother, saying that she had 'flu and couldn't drive home.

After she had sent it, she felt guilty and relieved in about equal proportions. The only way she could justify such behaviour was to make sure of selling the car that weekend. Samantha told her to put in an ad in the *Standard* for the next day. 'You're bound to make the last edition anyway,' she said. So Meg rang them, having spent an arduous half-hour trying to phrase the advertisement 'Pale blue MG—' was how it finally began.

Then she had to go to work. Mr Whitehorn was in one of his states. It was not rude to think this, since he frequently referred to them. There was a huge order to be sent to New York that would require, he thought, at least a week's packing. He had got hold of tea chests, only to be told that he had to have proper packing cases. There was plenty of newspaper and straw in the basement. He was afraid that that was where Meg would have to spend her day.

The basement was whitewashed and usually contained only inferior pieces, or things that needed repair. While working, Meg was allowed to have an oil stove, but it was considered too dangerous to leave it on by itself. Her first job was a huge breakfast, lunch, tea and coffee service bought by Mr Whitehorn in a particularly

successful summer sale in Suffolk. It had to be packed and listed, all two hundred and thirty-six pieces of it. It was lying on an old billiard table with a cut cloth, and Meg found that the most comfortable way to pack it was to bring each piece to a chaise-longue whose stuffing was bristling out at every point, and put the heap of newspapers on the floor beside her. Thus she could sit and pack, and after each section of the set she could put things back on the table in separate clutches with their appropriate labels. She was feeling much better than when she had woken up. Not having to face the drive: having put an advertisement into a serious paper almost made her feel that she had sold the car already: Val had said that she might go to a film with her on Sunday afternoon if her friend didn't turn up and she didn't think he would, so that was something to look forward to, and packing china wasn't really too bad if you took it methodically and didn't expect ever to finish.

In the middle of the morning, Mr Whitehorn went out in his van to fetch the packing cases. He would be back in about an hour, he said. Meg, who had run up to the shop to hear what he said—the basement was incredibly muffled and quiet—made herself a mug of coffee and went back to work. There was a bell under the door-rug, so that she could hear it if customers came.

She was just finishing the breakfast cups when she

saw it. The newspaper had gone yellow at the edges, but inside, where all the print and pictures were, it was almost as good as new. For a second, she did not pick up the page, simply stared at a large photograph of head and shoulders, and M1 MYSTERY in bold type above it.

The picture was of the girl she had picked up in Hendon. She knew that it was, before she picked it up, but she still had to do that. She *might* be wrong, but she knew she wasn't. The glasses, the hair, the rather high forehead . . . but she was smiling faintly in the picture . . .

' . . . petite, auburn-haired Mary Carmichael was found wrapped in her raincoat in a ditch in a lane not one hundred yards from the M1 north of Towcester. She had been assaulted and strangled with a lime green silk scarf that she was seen wearing when she left her office. . . . Mr Turner was discovered in the boot of the car—a black MG that police found abandoned in a car-park. The car belonged to Mr Turner, who had been stabbed a number of times and is thought to have died earlier than Miss Carmichael . . . '—

She realised then that she was reading a story continued from page one. Page one of the newspaper was missing. She would never know what Mr Turner looked

like. She looked again at the picture of the girl. 'Taken on holiday the previous year.' Even though she was smiling, or trying to smile, Mary Carmichael looked timid and vulnerable.

' . . . Mr Turner, a travelling salesman and owner of the car, is thought to have given a lift or lifts to Mary Carmichael and some other person, probably a man, not yet identified. The police are making extensive inquiries along the entire length of the route that Mr Turner regularly travelled. Mr Turner was married, with three children. Miss Carmichael's parents, Mr and Mrs Gerald Carmichael of Manchester, described their only daughter as very quiet and shy and without a boyfriend.'

The paper was dated March of the previous spring.

Meg found that her eyes were full of tears. Poor, poor Mary. Last year she had been an ordinary timid, not very attractive girl who had been given a lift, and then been horribly murdered. How frightened she must have been before she died—with being—assaulted—and all that. And now, she was simply a desolate ghost, bound to go on trying to get lifts, or to be helped; or perhaps even to *warn* people. . . . 'I'll pray for you,' she said to the picture, which now was so blurred through her tears

that the smile, or attempt at one, seemed to have vanished.

She did not know how long it was before the implications, both practical and sinister, crept into her mind. But they did, and she realised that they had, because she began to shiver violently—in spite of feeling quite warm—and fright was prickling her spine up to the back of her neck.

Mystery Murders. If Mr Turner was not the murderer of Mary, then only one other person could be responsible. The horrible man. The way he had talked of almost nothing but awful murders. . . . She must go to the police immediately. She could describe him down to the last detail: his clothes, his voice, his tinted spectacles, his frightful smell. . . . He had been furious with her when she had put him down at the service station . . . but, one minute, before that, before *then*, when she had let him out on the shoulder where the lorry was, he had taken ages to come back into the car—had walked right round it, and then, when he got in, and she had questioned him about the girl, and described her, he had become all sweaty, and taken ages to reply to anything she said. He must have *recognised* the car! She was beginning to feel confused: there was too much to think about at once. This was where being clever would be such a help, she thought.

She began to try to think quietly, logically: absolutely nothing but lurid fragments came to mind: 'a modicum, and sometimes, let's face it, a very great deal of fear'; the girl's face as she stood under the light on the island. Meg looked back at the paper, but there was really no doubt at all. The girl in the paper *was* the same girl. So—at last she had begun to sort things out—the girl *was* a ghost: the car, therefore, must be haunted. He certainly knew, or realised, something about all this: his final words—'I'm far from sure that *I trust you*'—that was because she had said that she didn't trust him. So—perhaps he thought she *knew* what had happened. Perhaps he had thought she was trying to trap him, or something like that. If he *really* thought that, and he was actually guilty, he surely wouldn't leave it at that, would he? He'd be afraid of her going to the police, of what, in fact, she was shortly going to do. He couldn't *know* that she hadn't seen the girl before, in the newspaper. But if he couldn't know, how could the police?

At this point, the door-bell rang sharply, and Meg jumped. Before she could do more than leap to her feet, Mr Whitehorn's faded, kindly voice called down. 'I'm back, my dear girl. Any customers while I've been away?'

'No.' Meg ran up the stairs with relief that it was he. 'Would you like some coffee?'

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'Splendid notion.' He was taking off his teddy-bear overcoat and rubbing his dry, white hands before the fan heater.

Later, when they were both nursing steaming mugs, she asked: 'Mr Whitehorn, do you remember a mystery murder case on the M1 last spring? Well, two murders, really? The man was found in the boot of the car, and the girl—'

'In a ditch somewhere? Yes, indeed. All over the papers. The real trouble is, that although I adore reading detective stories, *real* detective stories. I mean, I always find real-life crime just dull. Nasty, and dull.'

'I expect you're right.'

'They caught the chap though, didn't they? I expect he's sitting in some tremendously kind prison for about eighteen months. Be out next year, I shouldn't wonder. The law seems to regard property as far more important than murder, in my opinion.'

'Who did they catch?'

'The murderer, dear, the murderer. Can't remember his name. Something like Arkwright or James. Something like that. But there's no doubt at all that they caught him. The trial was all over the papers, as well. How have you been getting on with your marathon?'

Meg found herself blushing: she explained that she had been rather idle for the last half hour or so, and

suggested that she make up the time by staying later. No, no, said Mr Whitehorn, such honesty should be rewarded. But, he added, before she had time to thank him, if she *did* have an hour to spend tomorrow, Saturday morning, he would be most grateful. Meg had to agree to this, but arranged to come early and leave early, because of her advertisement.

The worst of having had that apparently comforting talk with Mr Whitehorn was that if they *had* already caught the man, then there couldn't be any point in going to the police. She had no proof that she hadn't seen a picture of poor Mary Carmichael; in fact, she realised that she might easily have done so, and simply not remembered because she didn't read murder cases. Going to the police and saying that you had seen a ghost, given a ghost a *lift* in your car, and *then* seen a picture in a newspaper that identified them, would just sound hysterical or mad. And there would be no point in describing the horrible man, if, in fact, he was just horrible but not a murderer. But at least she didn't have to worry about him: his behaviour had simply seemed odd and then sinister, *before* Mr Whitehorn had said that they had caught the murderer. There was nothing she needed to do about any of it. Except get rid of a haunted car.

After her scrambled eggs and Mars bar, she did some washing, including her hair and her hairbrush, and

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went to bed early. Just before she went to sleep, the thought occurred to her that her mother always thought that people—all people—were really better than they seemed, and her father was certain that they were worse. Possibly, they were just *what* they seemed—no more and no less.

In the morning, second post, she got a letter from her mother full of anxiety and advice. The letter, after many kind and impractical admonitions, ended: 'and you are not to think of getting up or trying to drive all this way unless you are feeling completely recovered. I do wish I could come down and look after you, but your father thinks he may be getting this wretched bug. He has read in the paper that it is all over the place, and is usually the first to get anything, as you know. Much love, darling, and take *care* of yourself.'

This made Meg feel awful about going to Mr Whitehorn's but she had promised him, and letting down one person gave one no excuse whatsoever for letting down another. Samantha had promised to sit on the telephone while Meg was out, as she was waiting for one of her friends to call.

When she got back to the flat, Samantha was on the telephone, and Val was obviously cross with her. 'She's been *ages* talking to Bruce and she is going out with him

in a minute, and I said I'd do the shopping, but she won't even say what she wants. She's a drag.'

Samantha said: 'Hold on a minute—six grapefruit and two rump steaks—that's all,' and went on listening, laughing and talking to Bruce. Meg gazed at her in dismay. How on earth were people who had read her advertisement and were *longing* to ring her up about it to get through? The trouble about Samantha was that she was so *very* marvellous to look at that it was awfully difficult to get her to do anything she didn't want to do.

Val turned kindly to Meg and said loudly: 'And your ad's in, isn't it? Samantha—you really are the limit. Meg, what would you like me to shop for you?'

Meg felt that this was terribly kind of Val, who was also pretty stunning, but in a less romantic way. Neither of the girls had ever shopped for her before; perhaps Val was going to become her friend. When she had made her list of cheese, apples, milk, eggs and Nescaff, Val said, 'Look, why don't we share a small chicken? I'll buy most of it, if you'll do the cooking. For Sunday,' she added, and Meg felt that Val was almost her friend already.

Val went, and at once, Samantha said to the telephone: 'All *right*: meet you in half an hour. Bye.' In one graceful movement she was off the battered sofa and

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stood running her hands through her long, black hair and saying: 'I haven't got a *thing* to wear!'

'Did anyone ring for me?'

'What? Oh—yes, one person—no, two, as a matter of fact. I told them you'd be in by lunchtime.'

'Did they sound interested in the car?'

'One did. Kept asking awful technical questions I couldn't answer. The other one just wanted to know if the car could be seen at this address and the name of the owner.' She was pulling off a threadbare kimono, looking at her face in a small, magnifying mirror she seemed always to have with her. 'Another one. . . ! They keep bobbing up like corks! I've gone on to this diet not a moment too soon.'

An hour went slowly by: nobody rang up about the car. Samantha finally appeared in fantastically expensive-looking clothes as though she was about to be photographed. She borrowed fifty pence off Meg for a taxi and went, leaving an aura of chestnut bath-stuff all over the flat.

The weekend was a fearful anti-climax. On Saturday, three people rang up—none of them people who had called before; one said that he thought it was a drop-head, seemed, almost to accuse her of it not being, although she distinctly said saloon in her ad. Two said they would come and look at the car: one of these

actually arrived, but he only offered her a hundred pounds less than she was asking, and that was that. On Sunday morning Meg cooked for ages, the chicken and all the bits, like bread sauce and gravy, that were to live up to it. At twelve-thirty Val got a call from one of her friends, and said she was frightfully sorry, but that she had to be out to lunch after all.

'Oh dear! Shall I keep it till the evening? The chicken will be cold, but the other—'

Val interrupted her by saying with slight embarrassment that she wouldn't be back to dinner, either. 'You eat it,' she ended, with guilty generosity.

When she had gone, the flat seemed very empty. Meg tried to comfort herself with the thought that anyway, she *couldn't* have gone to the cinema with Val, as she would have to stay in the flat in case the telephone rang. But she had been looking forward to lunch. If a person sat down to a table with you and had a meal, you stood a much better chance of getting to know them. Sundays only seemed quieter in London than they were in the country, because of the contrast of London during the week. As she sat down to her leg of chicken with bread sauce, gravy and potatoes done as her mother did them at home, she wondered whether coming to London was really much good after all. She did not seem to be making much headway: it wasn't turning out at all how

she had imagined it might, and at this moment she felt rather homesick. Whatever happened, she'd go home next weekend, and talk to her mother about the whole thing. Not—the car—thing, but Careers and Life.

Two more people rang during the afternoon. One was for Samantha, but the other was about the car. They asked her whether she would drive it to Richmond for them to see it, but when she explained why she couldn't they lost interest. She kept telling herself that it was too long a chance to risk losing other possible buyers by going out for such a long time, but as the grey afternoon settled drearily to the darker grey evening, she wondered whether she had been wrong.

She wrote a long letter to her mother, describing Samantha's clothes and Val's kindness, and saying that she was already feeling better (another lie, but how could she help it?): then she read last month's *Vogue* magazine and wondered what all the people in it, who wore rich car-coats and gave fabulous, unsimple dinner-parties and shooting lunches and seemed to know at least eight ways of doing their hair, were doing now. On the whole, they all seemed in her mind to be lying on velvet or leather sofas with one of their children in a party dress sitting quietly reading, and pots of azaleas and cyclamen round them in a room where you could only see one corner of a family portrait and a large white or honey-coloured

dog at their feet on an old French carpet. She read her horoscope: it said, you will encounter some interesting people, but do not go more than half-way to meet them, and watch finances—last month's horoscope anyway, so that somehow whether it had been right or not hardly counted. When she thought it must be too late for any more people to ring up, she had a long, hot bath, and tried to do her hair at least one other way. But her hair was too short, too fine, and altogether too unused to any outlandish intention, and obstinately slipped or fell back into its ordinary state. It was also the kind of uninteresting colour that people never even bothered to describe in books. She yawned, a tear came out of one eye, and she decided that she had better get on with improving her mind, to which end she settled down to a vast and heavy book on Morocco that Val said people were talking about. . . .

All week she packed and packed: china, glass, silver and bits of lamps and chandeliers. On Wednesday, someone rang up for her at the shop while she was out buying sausage rolls and apples for Mr Whitehorn's and her lunches. Mr Whitehorn seemed very vague about them: it hadn't seemed to be about the car, but something about her weekend plans, he thought. He *thought*, he reiterated, as though this made the whole thing more

doubtful. Meg could not think who it could be—unless it was the very shy young man with red hair and a stammer who had once come into buy a painting on a glass about Nelson's death. He had been very nice, she thought, and he had stayed for quite a long time after he had bought the picture and told her about his collection of what she had learned to call Nelsoniana. That was about the only person it could be, and she hoped he'd ring again, but he didn't.

By Wednesday, she had long given up hope of anyone buying the car as a result of the advertisement. Val and Samantha told her that Bruce and Alan both said it was the wrong time of the year to sell second-hand cars, and she decided that she had better try to sell it in the north, nearer home.

On Wednesday evening she had a sudden, irrational attack of fear. However much she reasoned with herself, she simply did not *want* to drive up the M1 alone in the car that she was now certain was haunted. She couldn't stand the thought of hearing the sounds she had heard, of seeing the girl again in the same place (possibly, why not?—ghosts were well known for repeating themselves): and when Samantha and Val came in earlier than usual and together, she had a—possibly not hopeless—idea. Would either or both of them like to come home for the weekend with her?

Their faces turned at once to each other; it was easy to see the identical appalled blankness with which they received the proposal. Before they could say that they wouldn't come, Meg intercepted them. 'It's lovely country, and my mother's a marvellous cook. We could go for drives in the car—' but she knew it was no good. They couldn't possibly come, they both said almost at once: they had dates, plans, it was awfully kind of her, and perhaps in the summer they might—yes, in the summer, it might be marvellous if there was a free weekend. . . .

Afterwards, Meg sat on her bed in the very small room that she had to herself, and cried. They weren't enough her friends for her to plead with them, and if she told them why she was frightened, they would be more put off than ever.

Next morning she asked Mr Whitehorn if he had ever been up north to sales and auctions and things like that.

Yes, he went from time to time.

'I suppose you wouldn't like to come up this weekend to stay? I could drive you to any places you wanted to go.'

Mr Whitehorn looked at her with his usual tired face, but also with what she could see was utter amazement

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'My dear child,' he said, when he had had time to think of it, 'I couldn't possibly do anything, *anything* at all like that at such short notice. It would throw out all my plans, you see. I always make plans for the weekend. Perhaps you have not realised it,' he went on, 'but I am a homosexual, you see. I thought you would know; running this shop and the states I get into. But I *always* plan my free time. I am lunching with a very dear friend in Ascot, and sometimes, not always, I stay the night there.' The confidence turned him pink. 'I had absolutely no intention of *misleading* you.'

Meg said of course not, and then they both apologised to each other and said it didn't matter in the least.

On Thursday evening both girls were out, and Meg, who had not slept at all well for the last two nights, decided that she was too tired to go on her own to the cinema, although it was *A Man for All Seasons* that she had missed and always wanted to see. She ate a poached egg and half a grapefruit that Samantha said was left over from her diet, and suddenly she had a brainwave. What she was frightened of, she told herself, was the idea that the poor girl would be waiting for her again at Hendon. If, therefore, she *avoided* Hendon, and got on to the M1 further north, she would be free of this anxiety. There might still be those awful sounds again, like she had

heard the first time, but she would just have to face that, drive steadily home, and when she got there, she decided, she would jolly well tell her mother about the whole thing. The idea, and the decision to tell her mother, cheered her so much that she felt less tired, and went down to the car to fetch the map. There, the car rug that her mother had given her in case she did not have enough on her bed pricked her conscience. She had managed to toil up the stairs with the flowers and marmalade and her case, but she had completely forgotten the rug; this was probably because her mother had put it in the car herself, and it now lay on the floor in the back. She would take it home, as she really didn't need it, and usually her father used it to protect his legs from draughts when he sat in or out of doors.

She found a good way on the map. She simply did not go left on to Hendon Way, but used the A1000 through Barnet and turned left on to the St Albans road. She could get on to the M1 on the way to Watford. It was easy. That evening she packed her party dress so that her mother could see it. She always packed the night before, so that she didn't rush too much in the mornings, got to work on time, and parked her car, as usual, round the corner from the shop. Mr Whitehorn had simply chalked 'No Parking' on the brick wall, and so far it had always worked.

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On Friday morning, she and Mr Whitehorn met each other elaborately, as though far more had occurred between them than had actually happened: the first half hour was heavy with off-handed good will, and they seemed to get in each other's way far more often than usual. They used the weather as a kind of demilitarised zone of conversation. Mr Whitehorn said that he heard on the wireless that there was going to be fog again, and Meg, who had heard it too, said oh dear and thanked him for telling her. Later in the morning, when things had eased between them, Mr Whitehorn asked her whether she had been successful in selling her car. Trains were so much easier in this weather, he added. They were, indeed. But she could hardly tell him that as she lived seventeen miles from the station, and her parents didn't drive, and the last bus had left by the time the train she would be able to catch had arrived, and her salary certainly couldn't afford a taxi . . . she couldn't tell him any of that: it would look like asking, begging for more money—she would never do it. . . .

But the train became a recurrent temptation throughout the long cold and, by the afternoon, foggy day. She banished the idea in the end by reminding herself that, with the cost of the advertisement, she simply did not have the money for the train fare: the train was out of the question.

Mr Whitehorn, who had spent the morning typing lists for the Customs (he typed with three fingers in erratic, irritable bursts), said that he would buy their lunch, as he needed the exercise.

When he had gone, Meg, who had been addressing labels to be stuck on to the packing cases, felt so cold that she fetched the other paraffin heater from the basement and lit it upstairs. She did not like to get another cardigan from her case in the car, as in spite of its being so near, it was out of sight from the shop, and Mr Whitehorn hated the shop to be left empty for a moment. This made her worry, stupidly, whether she had locked the car. It was the kind of worry that one had, like wondering if one had actually posted a letter *into* the letter-box: of course, one would have, but once any idea to the contrary set in, it would not go. So the moment he came back with hot sausages and Smith's crisps from the pub, she rushed out to the car. She had, in fact, left one back door open: she could have sworn that she hadn't, but there it was. She got herself another cardigan out of her case in the boot, and returned to her lunch. It was horrible out; almost dark, or at any rate opaque, with the fog, and the bitter, acrid air that seemed to accompany fogs in towns. At home, it would be a thick white mist—well, nearly white, but certainly not smelling as this fog smelled. The shop, in contrast, seemed

quite cosy. One or two people came to 'look around' while they ate; but there was never very much to see. Mr Whitehorn put all the rubbish that got included in lots he had bid for on to trays with a mark saying that anything on the tray cost 50p, or £1. Their serious stuff nearly always seemed to go abroad, or to another dealer. Mr Whitehorn always made weak but kindly little jokes about his rubbish collectors, as he called the ones who bought old photograph albums, moulded glass vases, or hair-combs made of tortoiseshell and bits of broken paste.

While she was making their coffee, Meg wondered whether perhaps Mr Whitehorn would be a good person to talk about the haunted car to. Obviously, asking him to stay had been a silly mistake. But he might be just the person to understand what was worrying her; to believe her and to let her talk about it. That was what she most wanted, she realised. Someone, almost anyone, to *talk* to her about it: to sort out what was honestly frightening, and what she had imagined or invented as fright.

But immediately after lunch, he set about his typing again, and got more and more peevish, crumpling up bits of paper and throwing them just outside the wastepaper basket, until she hardly liked to ask him, at five, whether she might go.

However, she did ask, and he said it would be all right

He could not know how difficult she found it to leave: she said goodnight to him twice by mistake, started to put her old tweed coat on, and then decided that with the second cardigan she wouldn't need it, took ages tying on her blue silk head-square, and nearly forgot her bag. She took out her car keys while she could find them easily in the light, shut the shop door behind her and, after one more look at him, angrily crouched over his typewriter, went to the car.

Once she got into the car, her courage and common sense returned. It was only, at the worst, a four-hour journey: she would be home then, and everything would be all right. She flung her overcoat into the back—it was far easier to drive without it hanging round the gear lever—had one final look at her map before she shut the car door, and set off.

It was more interesting going a different way out of London, even though it seemed to be slower, but the traffic, the fog, and making sure all the time that she was on the right road, occupied her mind, almost to the exclusion of anything else. She found her way on to the M1 quite easily; the signs posting it were more frequent and bigger than any other sign.

She drove for over an hour on the motorway, and

there was no sound in the car, no agonised, laboured breathing—nothing. It was getting rather hot, but the heater cleared the windscreen and she couldn't do without it for long. The fog was better, too, although patchy, and in the clearer bits she could see the fine misty rain that was falling all the time. She was sticking to the left-hand lane, because although it meant that lorries passed her from time to time, she felt safer in the fog than if she had been in the middle, and possibly unable to see either side of the road. She opened a crack of window because the car seemed to be getting impossibly hot and full of stale air. Another two hours, she thought, and decided that she might as well stop to take off her thick cardigan—she could use the hard shoulder just for that—and perhaps she had made far too much of her nerves and anxiety about the whole journey. She drew up carefully, and then saw a service area ahead—safer in one of those. 'At least I didn't give in,' she thought, and thought also how ashamed of herself she would have been if she had.

As she drew up in the car-park, she was just about to get out of her cardigan, when a huge hand reached out in front of her and twitched the driving mirror so that she could see him. He was smiling, his eyes full of triumph and malice. His breath reeked over her shoulder as she gave a convulsive gasp of pure shock. 'You must be a ghost!' She heard herself repeating this in a high voice

utterly unlike her own. 'You must be a ghost: you *must* be!'

'Only had to pick the car lock twice. You shouldn't have locked it *again* in the middle of the day.'

She knew she should start the car and drive back out on to the road, but she couldn't see behind her, and nearly lost all control when she felt something hard and pointed sticking into the back of her neck.

'They caught Mr Wrong, you see. But you seemed to know so *much*, and as you were driving the same car, I simply had to catch up with you somehow. Two birds with one stone, as it were.'

She made an attempt to get the brake off, but a hand clamped over her wrist with such sudden force that she cried out.

'Ever since you turned me out in that unkind manner, I have been trying to track you down. That is all I have done, but your advertisement was a great help.' She saw him watching her face in the mirror and licking the scum off his lips. She made a last effort.

'I shall turn you out again—any minute—I shall!'

He sucked in his breath, but he was still smiling. 'Oh no, you won't. This time, it will all be done my way.'

She thought she screamed once, in that single second of astonished disbelief and denial before she felt

Three Miles Up

the knife jab smoothly through the skin on her neck when speechless terror overwhelmed her and she became nothing but fear—her heart thudding, risen in her throat as though it would burst from her: she put one hand to the wound and felt no knife—only her own blood—there, as he said:

‘Don’t worry *too* much: just stick to fear. The fate worse than death tends to occur after it. I’ve always liked them warm.’

Three Miles Up and Other Strange Stories

Elizabeth Jane Howard

With an Introduction by Glen Cavaliero

'... Singularly pure examples of their kind.' So writes Glen Cavaliero of these strange stories by Elizabeth Jane Howard. Born in 1923, the author is best known for her skilfully-crafted novels of upper middle-class English life. Three of the four stories collected together here for the first time, 'Three Miles Up', 'Perfect Love' and 'Left Luggage', initially appeared alongside three stories by Robert Aickman in that touchstone of twentieth-century uncanny fiction, *We Are for the Dark* (1951), the year after Howard's first book, *The Beautiful Visit* (1950), had won the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize. The fourth and most recently written story, 'Mr Wrong', a chilling and thoroughly contemporary *tour-de-force*, was the title story in a collection of Howard's short fiction published in 1975. All four stories, which represent the sum of Elizabeth Jane Howard's strange short fiction, have the power to shock, thrill and puzzle in equal measure, and display the 'design, coherence [and] deliberate artistry' for which she is justly celebrated.

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